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RED AS A ROSE IS SHE.

A Novel.

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BY THE AUTHOR OF

"COMETH UP AS A FLOWER."

Rhoda Broughton

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.
1870.

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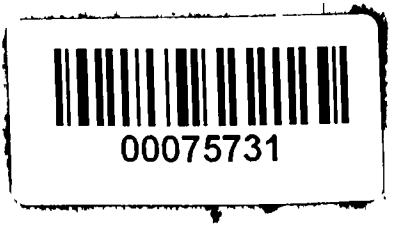

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RED AS A ROSE IS SHE.

CHAPTER I.

THE world's life is shorter by a fortnight than it was on that last day I told you of, and during that fortnight the ordinary amount of things have happened. The usual number of people have had their bodies knocked to atoms and their souls into eternity by express trains; the usual number of men and maids have come together in the *Times* column in holy matrimony; and the usual number of unwelcome babies have been consigned to the canals. A great many players have laid down their cards, risen up, and gone away from the game of life; but whether

winners or losers, they tell us not, neither shall we know awhile; and other players have taken their places, and have sat down with the zest of ignorance.

"Nature takes no notice of those that are coming or going."

She is briskly occupied at her old business —the business that seems to us so purposeless, progressless, bootless—the making only to unmake; the beautifying only to make hideous; the magnifying only to debase. Oh life! life! Oh clueless labyrinth! Oh answerless riddle!

September is waning mellowly into death, like a holy man to whom an easy passage has been vouchsafed; the land has been noisy with guns, and many partridges have been turned into small bundles of ruffled feathers—little round, brown corpses. Bob Brandon walks stoutly up the furzy hill-sides and along the stony levels after the shy, scarce birds; he is out and about all day, but

you do not hear him whistling or humming so often as you used to do. "He goeth heavily, as one that mourneth." The fortnight is past, and yet another week, and still Esther holds no speech of returning; her letters have waxed fewer, shorter, colder. Since that first one, mention of Gerard's name is there in them none. Bob is not of a suspicious nature, but he can add two and two together. He has been doing that little dreary sum all the last ten days, till his head aches. But, though he can do this sum himself, he will not suffer any one else to do it—at least in his presence.

One day at dinner, when Bessy was beginning a little sour adaptation of the text, "The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye," &c., to Esther, he interrupted her with downright outspoken anger and rebuke; and, though he apologised to her afterwards, and begged her pardon for having spoken rudely to her, yet she felt that that theme must not be dealt with

again. He had promised to love her always in all loyalty, and whether she were loyal or disloyal to him made no difference. He will let no man, woman, or child speak evil of her in his hearing:

> "..... love is not love
> That alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove."

Jack Craven, too, is beginning to wonder a little when Esther is going to return to the old farmhouse—beginning to feel rather lonely as he sits by himself on the window-ledge of an evening, smoking his pipe, with no one to take it out of his mouth now, and thinking on his unpaid for steam ploughs and sterile mountain-fields, with no one to speak comfortably to him—or console him with sweet illogical logic.

"All is not gold that glitters." Care gets up behind the man, however fine a horse he may be riding. Care is sitting

en croupe behind Miss Craven, and she cannot unseat him. It strikes her sometimes with a shock of fear that she is succeeding *too* well; that the admiration and liking and love she had hankered so greedily after, had striven unfairly for, had made wicked lightnings of her eyes to obtain, was ready to be poured out lavishly, eagerly, honestly at her feet, and she dare not put out a finger to take them up. She has been walking miles and miles of nights, up and down her bedroom, from door to window, from window to door, when all the rest of the house are abed and asleep.

"What *shall* I do?—what *shall* I do?" she cries out to her own heart, while her hands clasp one another hotly, and the candles, so tall at dressing time, burn short and low. "Oh! if I had some one to advise me!—not that I would take their advice, if it were to give up St. John! Give him up? How can I give up what I have not got? Oh Bob, Bob,

if you only knew how I hate you !—Only less than I hate myself! Oh! why was not my tongue cut out before that unlucky day when I said I would *try* to like you? Try, indeed! If there is need for trying, one may know how the trial will end. Shall I tell St. John? What! volunteer an unasked confession? Warn him off Robert's territory when he is not thinking of trespassing? And if I were to tell him—oh Heaven! I had sooner put my hand into a lion's mouth—what *would* he think of me? He, with his fastidious, strict ideas of what a woman should be and do and look? Shall I write and ask Bob to let me off? It would not break his heart; he is too good; only bad people ever break their hearts, as I shall do some day, I dare say. Oh! poor Bob, how badly I am treating you! Poor Bob! and his yellow roses that St. John made such fun of! How I wish that the thoughts of your long legs and your little sour Puritan

sisters did not make me feel so sick! Oh! if you would but be good enough to jilt me! What *shall* I do?—what *shall* I do? Wait, wait, go on waiting for what will never come, probably, and when I have degraded myself by waiting till hope is quite dead, go back whence I came, and jig-jog through life alongside of Bob in a poke bonnet like his mamma's. Ah Jack, Jack!' why did I ever leave you? How I wish that all Bobs and St. Johns and other worries were at the bottom of the Red Sea, and you and I king and queen of some desert island, where there was nothing nearer humanity than monkeys and macaws, and where there was no rent nor workmen's wages nor lovers to torment us!".

One must go to bed at some time or other, however puzzled and pondering one may be; and, in furtherance of this end, Esther, having reached this turn in her reflections, begins to undress. In so doing she misses a locket containing

Jack's picture, which she always wears round her neck. She must have dropped it downstairs, where perhaps some housemaid's clumsy foot may tread upon it, and mar the dear, ugly young face within. She must go and look for it, though the clock is striking one. She takes up her candle, and runs lightly downstairs. The gas is out. Great shadows from behind come up alongside, and then stretch ahead of her; the statues glimmer ghostly chill from their dark pedestals. With a shock of frightened surprise she sees a stream of light issuing through the half-open door of the morning-room. Is it burglars, or are the flowers giving a ball, as in Andersen's fair, fanciful tale? She creeps gently up, and peeps in. The lamp still burns on the centre table, and pacing up and down, up and down, as she has been doing overhead, is a man buried in deepest thought. Fear gives place to a great, pleasant shyness. "I—I—I have lost my locket," she stammers.

He gives a tremendous start. "You up still!" he says, in astonishment. "Lost your locket, have you? Oh! by-the-by, I found it just now; here it is. Do you know (with a smile) I could not resist the temptation of looking to see who you had got inside it. Are you very angry?"

"Very!" she answers, drooping her eyes under his. She could sit and stare into Bob's eyes by the hour together if she liked, only that it would be rather a dull amusement; with St. John it is different.

"Don't go; stay and talk a minute. It is so pleasant to think that we are the only conscious, sentient beings in the house—all the others sleeping like so many pigs," he says, coming over to her with an excited look on his face, such as calm, slow-pulsed English gentlemen are not wont to wear.

"No, no, I cannot—I must not."

She has taken the bracelets off her

arms, and the rose from her hair: there she stands in her ripe, fresh beauty, with only the night and St. John to look at her.

"Five minutes," he says, with pleading humility, but putting his back against the dook as he speaks.

"If you *prevent* my going, of course I cannot help myself," she answers, putting on a little air of offended dignity to hide her tremulous embarrassment.

"Don't be offended! Do you know" (leaving his post of defence to follow her) —"do you know what I have been doing ever since you went—*not* to bed apparently?"

"Drinking brandy and soda-water, probably" (looking rather surly, and affecting to yawn).

"That would have been hardly worth mentioning. I have been wondering whether my luck is on the turn. I have been da—— I mean, very unlucky all my life. I never put any money on a horse

that he was not sure to be nowhere. Luck does turn sometimes, doesn't it? Do you think mine is turning?"

"How can I tell?"

"You don't ask in what way I have been so unlucky. Why don't you? Have you no curiosity?"

"I never like to seem inquisitive," answers Esther, coldly, hoping that he does not notice how the white hands that lie on her lap are trembling.

"Do you recollect my telling you that I had made a great fool of myself once?"

"Yes."

"Do you care to hear about it, or do you not?" pulling at his drooping moustache, in some irritation at her feigned indifference.

"Yes, I care," she answers, lighting up an eager, mobile face—fear, shyness, and the sense of the impropriety of the situation all ceding to strong curiosity.

"Well, it was about a woman, of course.

Cela va sans dire; a man never can get into a scrape without a woman to help him, any more than he can be born, or learn his A B C."

"Was she handsome?" looking up and speaking quickly.

That is always the first question a woman asks about a rival. I do not know why, I am sure, as many of the greatest mischiefs that have been done on earth have been done by ugly women. Rousseau's Madame d'Houdetot squinted ferociously.

"Pretty well. She had a thundering good figure, and knew how to use her eyes. By-the-by" (with an anxious discontent in his tone), "so do you. I often wish you did not; I hate being able to trace one point of resemblance between you and her."

"Did she refuse you?" asks Esther, hastily, too anxious for the sequel of the story to think of resenting the accusation made against her eyes.

"Not she! I should not have been the one to blame her if she had; one cannot quarrel with people for their tastes. She swore she liked me better than any one else in the world; that she would go down to Erebus with me, be flayed alive for me —all the protestations usual in such cases, in fact, I suppose," he ends bitterly.

"And threw you over?" says Essie, leaning forward with lips half apart, and her breast rising and falling in short, quick undulations.

"Exactly; had meant nothing else all along. I filled only the pleasant and honourable situation of decoy duck to lure on shyer game, and when the bird was limed—such a bird, too! a great heavy haw-haw brute in the Carabineers, with a face like a horse—she pitched me away as coolly as you would pitch an old shoe—or as you would pitch *me*, I dare say, if you had the chance."

"And what did you do?" asks Essie,

breathlessly, her great eyes, black as death, fastened on his face.

St. John smiles—a smile half fierce, half amused.

"Run him through the body, do you suppose?—spitted him like a lark or a woodcock?—cut out his heart and made her eat it, as the man did to his wife in that fine old Norman story? No; I could have done any of them with pleasure if I had had the chance; with all our veneering and French polish, I think the tiger is only half dead in any of us; but I did not; I did none of them: I—prepare for bathos, please—I went out hunting; it was in winter, and, as misfortunes never come singly, I staked one of the best horses I ever was outside of: that diverted the current of my grief a little, I think."

He speaks in a jeering, bantering tone, scourging himself with the rod of his own ridicule, as men are apt to do when they are conscious of having made

signal asses of themselves in order to be beforehand with the world.

"And she told you she was fond of you?" ejaculates Essie, raising her sweet face, sympathetic, indignant, glowing, towards him.

"Scores of times—swore it. I suppose it is no harder to tell a lie a hundred times than once; *ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.* Tell me," he says, vehemently, leaning over her, and taking hold of her hand, as if hardly conscious of what he was doing—"you are a woman, you must know—tell me, is there no difference between truth and lies? Have they both *exactly* the same face? How is a man to tell them apart?"

They are both speaking in a low key, almost under their breath, for fear of drawing down upon themselves the apparition of Sir Thomas in *déshabille* and a blunderbuss. Their faces are close together; she can see the lines that

climate and grief and passion have drawn about his eyes and mouth—can see the wild, honest anxiety looking through his soul's clear windows.

"I—I—don't know," she answers, stammering, and shivering a little, half with fear at his vehemence, half with the strong contagion of his passion.

"Do you ever tell untruths?" he asks, hurriedly, scanning her face with anxious eyes, that try to look through the mask of fair, white flesh, and see the heart underneath. "Don't be angry with me, but I sometimes fancy that you might."

"*I!* what do you mean?" snatching away her hand, and the angry blood rushing headlong to her cheeks.

"Is thy servant a dog that he should do this thing?" Hazael was only the first of a long string who have asked that virtuously irate question.

His countenance clears a little. "You must forgive me," he says, repentantly. "I suppose it is my own unlucky ex-

perience that has made me so suspicious; because my own day has been cloudy, I have wisely concluded upon the non-existence of the sun. But, come" (smiling a little), "one good turn deserves another: have you nothing to tell me in return for the long list of successes I have been confiding to you?"

He watches her changing, flushing, paling face, with a keen solicitude which surprises himself. What can this downy, baby-faced rustic have to confess? Now for Bob! Now is the time—now or never! Sing, oh goddess, the destructive wrath of St. John, the son of Thomas! What time, place, situation, can be suitabler for such a tale? It is an hour and a half past midnight; they love one another madly, and they are alone.

Are they alone, though? Is this one of the statues stepped down from its pedestal in the hall that is coming in at

the door, severely, chilly, fair, with a candle in its hand?

"Miss Craven!" ejaculates Constance (for it is she), stopping suddenly short, while a look of surprised displeasure ripples over her calm, smooth face.

Silence for a second on the part of everybody.

"It is a pity, St. John," says Miss Blessington, drawing herself up, and looking an impersonation of rigid, aggressive, pitiless virtue, "that you and Miss Craven should choose such a very unseasonable time for your interviews; it is not a very good example for the servants, if any of them should happen to find you here!"

"The servants have something better to do than to come prying and eavesdropping upon their betters," retorts St. John, flushing angry-red to the roots of his hair, and not taking the most conciliatory line of defence.

"You are mistaken if you think I have been eavesdropping," says Constance, with dignified composure, her grave face looking out chastely cold from the down-fallen veil of her yellow hair. "I could not sleep, and came down to look for a book. Pray don't let me disturb your *tête-à-tête!*" making a movement towards going.

"Don't be a fool, Conny!" cries St. John, hastily, in bitter fear of having compromised Esther by his ill-advised detention of her: "it is the purest accident your having found Miss Craven and me together here!"

"I am well aware of that," she answers, with a little smiling sneer.

"You know what I mean, perfectly well: it is the purest accident our *being* here. Miss Craven lost her locket, and——"

"And" (smiling still)—"and you have been helping her to look for it. Yes, I see. Well, I—hope you will find it.

Good night!" going out and closing the door behind her.

"What did she say?—what does she mean?" cries Essie, panting, and with a face hardly less white than her dress.

"What does it matter what she means? She's a fool!" answers St. John, wrathfully. "Go to bed, and don't think about her; who cares?"

But he looks as if he did care a good deal.

CHAPTER II.

The weekly clearance of mundane books has been made at Plas Berwyn; the skimp drab gowns, and the ill-made frock coat, whose flaps lap over one another so painfully behind, have been endued by the Misses Brandon and their brother respectively. At church has been all the Brandon household: son and daughters, man-servant and maid-servant, ox and sheep, camel and ass. I need hardly say that the last quartette have been introduced merely for the sake of euphony, and to give a fuller rhythm to the close of the sentence. The Misses Brandon always stand as stiff as pokers during the creed, with their backs to the altar. It amuses them, and it does not do anybody else any

harm, so why should not they, poor women? Bob truckles to the Scarlet Woman; he bows, and turns his honest, serious face to the east. The service is in Welsh, of which he does not understand a word. He can pick his way pretty well through the prayers, however, by the help of a Welsh and English prayer book. There are several landmarks that he knows, whose friendly faces beam upon him now and again when he is beginning to flounder hopelessly among uncouth words of seven consonants and a vowel. These are his chief finger-posts: "Gogoniant ir Tad, ac ir Mab, ac ir Yspryd Glan;" that is, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." "Gwared ni, Arglywd daionus!" "Good Lord, deliver us!" "Na Ladratta!" "Thou shalt not steal!"

Jack Craven has been to church too, and has, as he always does, been reading the inscriptions on the coffin-plates, nailed up, Welsh fashion, against the dilapidated

whitewashed walls in lieu of monumental tablets. Esther has also been to church; has been in state in a great close carriage, in company with Sir Thomas, Miladi, and Miss Blessington. Sir Thomas has been storming the whole way about a gap he detected in a hedge that they passed, through which some cattle have broken, so that they all arrive at the church door in that calmly devout state of quietude which is the fittest frame of mind for the reception of Divine truth.

The Gerard pew in Felton church is as large as a moderate-sized room, and is furnished with armchairs and a fireplace. In winter, Sir Thomas spends fully half the service-time in poking the fire noisily and raking out the ashes. There is no fire now, and he misses it. A high red curtain runs round the sacred enclosure, and through it the farmers' wives and daughters strain their eyes to catch a glimpse of Miladi's marabout feathers, and Miss Blessington's big golden chignon and

little green arcophane bonnet. St. John generally pulls the brass rings of his bit of curtain aside along the brass rods, to make a peep-hole for himself over the congregation. The shape and size of the pew do away with the necessity for any wearisome conformity of attitude among the inmates. During the prayers, Sir Thomas stands bolt upright, with one bent knee resting on his chair; his bristling grey head, shaggy brows, and fierce spectacles looming above the red curtain, to the admiration and terror of the row of little charity girls beneath. Constance kneels forward on a hassock, with a large ivory prayer-book, gold-crossed, red-edged, in one hand, and a turquoise and gold-topped double scent-bottle and cobweb cambric handkerchief in the other. She confesses in confidence to her pale lavender gloves that she has done that which she ought not to have done, and has left undone that which she ought to have done; making graceful little salaams and undu-

lations of head and body every two minutes. Miladi confesses that she has gone to sleep. St. John makes no pretence of kneeling at all: he leans, elbow on knee and head on hand, and looks broken-hearted, as men have a way of doing in church.

In the afternoon, no one at Felton thinks of attending Divine service. It is a fiat of Sir Thomas's that no carriage, horses, or servants are to be taken out more than once a day, and the two miles' walk is an insuperable impediment to Lady Gerard, and hardly less so to Constance.

After luncheon the three ladies are sitting in the garden, with the prospect of four unbroken hours of each other's companionship before them. Masses of calceolarias, geraniums, lobelias, are flaring and flaunting around them — masses in which the perverted eye of modern horticulture sees its ideal of beauty. Nature, in her gardening, never plants great,

gaudy squares and ovals and rounds of red and blue and yellow without many shades of tenderest grey and green to soften and relieve them. Across the grass St. John comes lounging; his Sunday frock coat sitting creaseless to his spare, sinewy figure. Esther hates the sight of that coat: it reminds her so painfully, by its very unlikeness, of the singular garment that forms the head and crown of her betrothed's scant wardrobe.

"Do you know, I have half a mind to go to Radley church this afternoon. Will any one come with me?—will you, Conny?" turning, mindful of last night, with a conciliatory smile to Miss Blessington.

"How far is it?" she asks, indolently, divided between her hatred of walking and her desire to frustrate the *tête-à-tête* she sees impending between St. John and Esther.

"Three or four miles; four, I suppose."

She lifts her large blue eyes languidly. "Four miles there, and four miles back! Are you mad, St. John? What do you suppose one is made of?"

"Will *you* take pity on me then, Miss Craven?" turning eagerly to Esther.

She tilts her hat low down over her little, straight, Greek nose, looks up at him with shy coquetry under the brim, but answers not.

"A man who delights in solitude must be either a wild beast or a god, don't you know? I have no pretence to be either; I hate my own society cordially. Come" (with a persuasive ring in his pleasant voice); "you had much better!"

"Don't be so absurd, St. John!" cries Miss Blessington, pettishly. "Miss Craven would far rather be left in peace."

"Would you?" (appealing to her.)

"No—o; that is—I mean—I think I should like the walk, if I may. May

I, Lady Gerard? do you mind?" (turning sweet red cheeks and quick eyes towards her hostess.)

"*I*, my dear! Why should I mind?" responds Miladi, leaning back and fanning herself with a large fan (I believe that fat women often suffer a foretaste of the torments of the damned in the matter of heat)—"so as you don't ask me to go with you (with a fat smile). And, St. John, be sure that you are back in time for dinner, there's a good boy! You know what a fuss Sir Thomas is always in on Sunday evening?"

"I know that Sir Thomas is digging his grave with his teeth as fast as he can," answers St. John, disrespectfully.

"Shall not we be rather late for church if we have four miles to go?" asks Esther, as she steps out briskly beside her companion, while heart and conscience keep up a quarrelsome dialogue within her.

"It is not four miles; it is only three."

"You told Miss Blessington four?"

"So I did; but I drew for the extra mile upon the rich stores of my imagination."

"Why did you?" she asks, turning a wondering rosy face set in the frame of a minute white bonnet towards him.

"Did you ever hear of the invitations that the Chinese give one another?" he asks, laughing, and switching off a fern-head with a baby umbrella — "which, however pressing they may be, are always expected, by the givers to be declined. My invitation to Conny was a Chinese one: I was not quite sure that she would understand it as such, and I was so afraid that she would yield to my importunities, that I had to embroider a little in the matter of distance; do you see?"

There has been rain in the morning; now the clouds have rent themselves

asunder, and broken up into great glistering rocks, peaks, and spires, such as no fuller on earth could white:

"Blue isles of heaven laugh between."

The breeze comes more freshly over the wet grasses and flowers, and blows in little fickle puffs against St. John's bronzed cheeks and Esther's carnation ones. The girl's heart is pulsing with a keen, sharp joy; all the keener, as the heavens' blue is deeper for the clouds that hover about it.

"I shall have him all to myself for three hours," she is saying inwardly; "he will speak to no one but me; he will hear no one else's voice (she forgets the parson and clerk). Surely Bob may spare me these three hours, and just a few more, out of the great long life during which I shall tramp-tramp at his side! Three hours:

"Then let come what come may,
No matter if I go mad,
I shall have had my day."

"Let me carry your prayer book?"

"No, thanks; it is not heavy" (retaining it, mindful of a certain inscription in the fly-leaf).

"I am like a retriever; I like to have something to carry" (taking it from her with gentle violence).

"'*Esther Craven*, from *Robert Brandon*.' Who *is* Robert Brandon when he is at home?" (speaking rather shortly.)

Esther's heart leaps into her mouth. Shall she tell him all *now*, this minute, without giving herself time for second thoughts, which are not by any means always best? Shall she lift off the weight of compunction, anxiety, shame, that has been pressing upon her for the last fortnight?—let it fall down, as the dead albatross fell from the Ancient Mariner's neck—

"Like lead into the sea?"

The subject has introduced itself natur-

ally, easily, without any of the dragging in by the head and shoulders of the officiously-volunteered confessions that she had salved her conscience by deprecating. Shall she, with strong, brave hand, push away all hope of the fine house and the broad lands, of the carriages and horses, the roses and pine-apples, the down pillows and fragrances of life? Shall she courageously, nobly, and yet in mere bare duty, turn away from the fairy prince and return to her hovel and scullionship? Shall she, or shall she not?

"Who *is* Robert Brandon?" repeats St. John, rather crossly.

In the second that follows Esther's life destiny is settled. She refuses the good and chooses the evil. ("He is the man I am engaged to," that is what she ought to have said.)

"He is in the ——th foot." That is what she does say, blushing till the tears come into her eyes, turning away

her head, and feeling stabbed through and through with shame.

"An ally of yours?" (quickly.)

"I have known him all my life," she answers, evasively.

"I thought he was a very young child, from this specimen of his caligraphy," remarks Gerard, superciliously, examining Bob's sprawly, slanty characters. "He would be none the worse for a few writing lessons."

Esther is a mean young woman: she feels ashamed of her poor lover, and his pothooks and hangers, and yet vexed with St. John for sneering at them.

"It was a fact worth inscribing, I must say," continues he, ironically—"the making of such a very handsome present," holding the poor little volume between his lavender kid finger and thumb; and surveying it with a disparaging smile. "He must have had a great deal of change out of sixpence, I should think."

"If you have nothing better to do than

abuse my property," cries Esther, impulsively, snatching it out of his hand, "you may give it me back," looking half disposed to whimper.

"I apologise," responds St. John, gravely. "I did not mean to offend you; I give you *carte blanche* to insult mine" (holding out a very minute Russia leather one). "But may I ask, is Mr. Robert Blandon, or Brandon, or what's his name, your godfather?"

"No; why?"

"Because I never heard of any one being given a prayer book except as a wedding present, or by their godfathers and godmothers at their baptism. As you are not married, I know it could not have been the first case, and so I concluded it must be the last."

"Robert is not old enough to be my godfather," says Essie, overcoming by a great effort the repugnance to pronouncing the fateful name: "he is quite young; a great deal younger than you." she ends, rather spitefully.

"He might easily be that," replies St. John, coldly. "Once, not so very many years ago, in whatever company I was, I always was the youngest present; now, on the contrary, in whatever company I am, I always feel the eldest present. I don't suppose I always am, but I always feel as if I were."

"I believe old people have the best of it after all," says Esther, recovering a little of her equanimity: "they have certainly fewer troubles than young ones. I should say that Sir Thomas was decidedly a happier man than you are."

"A man's happiness is proportioned to the simplicity of his tastes, I suppose," answers St. John, sardonically. "Sir Thomas's happiness lies in a nutshell: he has two ruling passions—eating and bullying; he has a very fair cook to satisfy the one, and my mother always at hand for the gratification of the other."

"We all have our ruling passions," rejoins Esther, with a light laugh, "only

very often we will not own to them. Mine is burnt almonds; what is yours?"

"Going to church," he replies, in the same tone; "as you may perceive by the strenuous efforts I have made to get there this afternoon."

Radley church stands on a knoll. Radley parishioners have to go upwards to be buried—a happy omen, it is to be hoped, for the destination of their souls. The church has a little grey tower, pretty, old, and squat, and a peal of bells—these are its claims to distinction—a merry peal, as people say; but to me it seems that in all the gamut of sad sounds there is nothing sadder, sorrowfuller, than bells chiming out sweetly and solemnly across the summer air.

Rung in by the grave music of their invitation, St. John and Esther enter. Verger or pew-opener is there none, so they slip into the first of the open sittings that presents itself. The clergyman is young and energetic: he has rooted up

the tall, worm-eaten oak pews—disfiguring compromises between cattle pen and witness box—has clothed several

> "Dear little souls
> In nice white stoles—"

and is trying to teach himself intoning. He produces at present only prolonged whining groans, but it is a step in the right direction.

Rest is good after exertion, and so Essie thinks. The south wind has been playing tricks with the dusk riches of her hair. Nature has been laying on her bistre under the great liquid eyes, and emptying a whole potful of her rouge on the rose-velvet round of her cheeks. She is not in apple-pie order at all, and yet

> "She was most beautiful to see,
> Like a lady from a far countree."

If Esther were to murder any one, and her guilt were to be brought home to her as plainly as the eye of day shines in the

sky at noon, judge and jury would combine to acquit her.

"Blessed be God, who has made beautiful women!" says the Bedouin, and Gerard echoes the benediction, as he stands with his big lavender thumb on one side of the hymn book, and her small lavender thumb on the other, while the "dear little souls" are singing sweetly and quickly:

> "There God for ever sitteth,
> Himself of all the Crown;
> The Lamb, the Light that shineth,
> And goeth never down."

Grand words, that make one feel almost good and almost happy merely to say them!

There is only one hymn book in the pew, and St. John is glad of it. There is something pleasant in the sense of union and partnership, though it be only a three minutes' partnership in a dog's-eared psalter.

"Is not there some different way of

going home?" asks Essie, as they stand side by side after service in the high churchyard, looking down on the straggling damson trees, the grey smoke spiring northwards under the south wind's faint blowing, the dark-blue green of the turnip fields. "I hate going back the same way one came; it shows such a want of invention!"

"There is another way," answers St. John, scooping out a little plump green moss from a chink in the wall with the point of his umbrella, while the parson and the parson's sister, on their homeward way, turn their heads to look at them—the parson at Esther, the parson's sister at St. John—Jack at Jill and Jill at Jack, as is the way of the world; "but it is a good deal longer and a great deal muddier than the one we came by."

"I like mud," says Essie, gaily, stooping and picking a daisy from a little child's grave at her feet; "it is my native element; at home we are up to

our knees in mud in winter, and over our ankles in summer."

So they chose the longer and the muddier way. It is its length that is its recommendation to them both, I think.

Down the village street, past the Loggerheads and the Forge, and along a long country lane, paved unevenly with round stones after a way our forefathers in some of the northern counties had of paving, in imperfect prophetic vision of MacAdam. To-day no broad waggon-wheel groans, nor hooved foot clatters along; only a few cottagers and smart-bonneted servant girls trudge along to the Primitive Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, built A.D. 1789, that stands in simple dissenting ugliness at the hill-foot, while over its newly-painted, gingerbread-coloured door stands this modest announcement: "This is the Gate of Heaven."

"It strikes me," says St. John, rousing himself out of a reverie which has lasted

a quarter of an hour—"it strikes me as one of the few instances in which one's experience tallies with what one reads in novels, the awkward knack people have of interrupting one at the wrong moment."

"How do you mean?" asked Essie, coming out of a reverie too.

"I never," pursues he, taking off his hat, and passing his hand over the broad red mark it has made on his forehead—"I never read aloud to any one in my life—I was rather fond of reading poetry at one period of my history, I leave you to guess which—not that she cared about it—she did not know Milton from Tommy Moore; but I never read to her in the course of my life without the footman coming in to put coals on at the most affecting passages—Arthur's parting from Guinivere, say, or Medora's death—and clattering down the tongs and shovel, making the devil's own row."

Esther laughs.

"These reflections are *à propos* of—what?"

"Of Conny's most ill-timed entry last night," he answers, with energy. "I don't suppose she makes such a midnight raid once in five years, and she certainly could not have found you and me *tête-à-tête* at two in the morning more than once in fifty years. Why could not she leave us in peace that once? We did not grudge her any amount of pleasant dreams; why need she grudge us our pleasant wakefulness?"

"Do you think she came on purpose, then?" asks Essie, her eyes opening as round in alarmed surprise as a baby's when a grown-up person makes ugly faces at it.

He shrugs his shoulders slightly. "Cannot say, I'm sure. Conny is not much in the habit of burning the midnight oil in the pursuit of knowledge generally. If it *was* accident, she came in at a wonderfully *à propos*, or rather *mal à propos*, moment. Tell me," he says, crossing over to her side of the road, and fixing frankly-asking eyes upon her; "I may be

mistaken—it is a misfortune to which I am often incident—but I could not help thinking that, just as that unlucky candle appeared round the corner last night, you were going to tell me something—something about yourself? I thought I saw it in your face. I think I deserved some little reward for raking up for your behoof the ashes of that old fire that I burnt my fingers at so badly once."

Esther still remains silent, but turns her long neck from one side to the other with a restless, uneasy motion.

"Are lamplight and the small hours indispensable accessories?" he asks, with gentle pleading in look and words—"or could not you tell me as well now?"

"Tell you what?" she says, turning round sharp upon him, and snapping, as a little cross dog snaps at the heels of the passer-by—"must I invent something?"

"Are you sure that it is *necessary* to invent?" he asks, scanning the fair, troubled face with searching gaze.

She pulls a bunch of nuts out of the hedge from among their rough-ribbed green leaves, and begins to pick them out of their sheath. "What am I to tell you?" she says, petulantly, a suspicion that he may have heard a rumour of her engagement crossing her mind: "that I live in an old farm-house with my brother Jack, and that we are very hard up—you know that already; that 'Sudrydachi' is Welsh for 'How do you do?' and that our asparagus has answered very badly this year?"

"Of course, I cannot force your confidence." he answers, rather coldly.

"Why do you insist upon my having something to confide? What reason have you for supposing that I have?" she cries, with increased irritation.

"None whatever, but what you yourself have given me!"

"*I!*"

"Yes, *you;* not your words, but your face now and then. Don't think me

impertinent. You know what unhappy reason I have had to be suspicious. But tell me" (trying his best to get a look round the corner into the averted, perturbed face of his companion)—"tell me whether there is not something between you and—and—that fellow that gave you the prayer book?"

Esther's heart gives one great bounding throb; the thin muslin of her dress but poorly conceals its hard, quick pulsings.

One more chance for her! Fate generally gives us two or three chances before it allows us to consign ourselves irrecoverably to the dogs. One more choice between loyalty and disloyalty—a plain question, to be answered plainly, unequivocally—Yes or No; Robert or St. John. The man whose conversation bores her, whose proximity and whose gaze leave her colder than snow on an alp's high top an hour before sunrise, and with whom she has promised to

live till death do them part; or the man, no whit better or handsomer, whose coming, felt, though unseen, makes her whole frame vibrate, as a harp's strings vibrate under the player's hands—beneath whose eyes hers sink down bashful, yet passionate — the man whom, after this week, she must see never again until death do them unite. Woman-like, she tries to avoid the alternative.

"What is that to you?" she retorts, abruptly, endeavouring to be playful, and succeeding only in being rude.

"Nothing whatever," he replies, flushing angrily; and then they walk on for some distance in silence.

"Are you angry?" asks Esther, presently, with a smile, half saucy, half frightened.

"*I?* not in the least," he replies, with an air of ostentatious indifference, but with a complexion undoubtedly florider than nature made his.

"You look excessively cross, and have

not uttered a word for the last half mile," she says, pouting out her full red under-lip, and then looking (a little alarmed at her own audacity) to see in what spirit he takes her impertinence.

"When I do not get civil answers to civil questions, I think it best to hold my tongue," he says, stalking along with his head up, and hitting viciously with his umbrella at the tall yellow mullens in the hedge.

"People's ideas differ as to what *are* civil questions," says Essie, trying to stalk too, and to elevate nose and chin in emulation of his. "Suppose that I had asked you how many times you had been refused, would you have answered me?"

"Undoubtedly I should," he replies, gravely.

"How many times have you?" she asks, coming down from her elevation of offended dignity with a jump, and looking up at him with naïve, eager curiosity.

"Questions should be answered in the

order of priority in which they are asked," he replies, with a smile of amusement at her simplicity, but with a good deal of dissatisfied doubt underlying the smile. "Answer my question, and I'll answer yours."

Esther turns away, and passes her hand along the hedge, catching idly at any grasses or flowers that come in her way, to the great detriment of her Sunday gloves. His anxiety overcomes his hurt pride.

"Give me an answer one way or another," he says, breathing rather short. "Is there not something between you and him?"

Esther is silent. "No" is a plain downright lie, at which conscience demurs, and "Yes" a cannon-ball that will knock her away from St. John's side out into the drear, great world for ever.

"For God's sake answer me!" he says again, in great agitation at a dumbness that seems to him ominous.

Hearing the sharp pain and angry fear

in his voice, she hesitates no longer. Lie or no lie, she takes the plunge.

"Nothing!" she says, faintly, turning first milk-white, then red as a rose in her burning prime.

"Why do you turn away your face? Are you quite certain?" he asks, quickly, only half convinced by her weak negation.

"Certain," she replies, indistinctly, as if just able to echo his words, but not to frame any of her own.

"Why do you stammer and blush, then, whenever his name is mentioned?" he asks, with jealous impatience.

"I won't stand being catechised in this way," she cries, blazing out angrily, and stopping short, while sparks of fire, half quenched in tears of vexation, dart from the splendid night of her eyes. "I have answered a question which you ought never to have asked; you must be a person of very little observation," she continues, sharply, "not to have discovered during the three weeks that I have been

with you that I blush at everything and nothing; I should be as likely as not to blush when Sir Thomas's name was mentioned, or—or——"

"Or mine," suggests St. John, ironically; "put it as strongly as you can."

"Or yours, if you like," she answers, hardily, but crimsoning painfully meanwhile in confirmation of her words.

At a little distance farther on their path forsakes the road, and leads across a line of grass fields. St. John crosses the first stile, and waits politely on the other side to help Esther over.

"No, no!" she cries, petulantly, withdrawing her foot from the first rung—"I hate being helped over stiles. Go on, please."

He obeys, and walks on. Her dignity does not allow her to hurry her pace to overtake him, nor does his permit him to slacken his steps till she come up with him; and they walk on in single file, goose-fashion, through two fields and a half.

Dividing and watering the third field, as the four ancient rivers divided and watered the rose gardens and asphodel fields of Paradise, a little beck, with many turns and bends and doublings back upon itself, strays babbling, like a silver ribbon twisted among the meadow's green hair. It is not like the Welsh brooks, fretful and brawling, making little waterfalls and whirlpools and eddies over and about every water-worn stone; smoothly it flows on, as a holy, eventless life flows towards the broad sea whose tides wash the shores of Time. In dry weather it is slow-paced enough, and crystal clear; now the late heavy rains have quickened its current, and rolled it along, turbid and muddy. Even though swollen, however, it is still but a narrow thread, and St. John clears it at a jump.

"Shall I go on still?" he asks, with a malicious smile from the other side, addressing Esther, who stands looking down

rather ruefully at the quick brown water at her feet.

"I believe you knew of this, and brought me here on purpose to make a fool of me," she cries, reproachfully.

"I did nothing of the kind," he answers, quietly. "Last time I was here there was a plank thrown across; but you see the stream has been higher than it is now" (pointing to the drenched grass and little deposit of sticks and leaves on the bank), "and has probably carried it away."

"How *am* I to get over?" she asks, hopelessly, with a look of childish distress on her face.

"I'll carry you," he answers, springing back to her side; "the brook is shallower farther down; I can lift you over with the greatest ease imaginable."

"*That* you shan't!" answers Esther, civilly turning her back upon him.

"May I ask why?" he asks coolly. "After the number of times I have carried

you up and down stairs at Felton, you can hardly be afraid of my letting you fall?"

"The very fact of my having already had so many obligations to you makes me resolved not to add to their number," she replies, stiffly, with an effort to look dignified, which her laughing, *débonnaire*, seductive style of beauty renders peculiarly unsuccessful.

"If you can suggest any better plan, I shall be delighted to assist you in carrying it out," rejoins he, smothering a smile.

"I'll jump!" she says, desperately, eyeing meanwhile the hurrying stream and the space between bank and bank with calculating look.

"You cannot," he cries, hastily; "you'll get a ducking as sure as I stand here Don't be so silly!"

The word "silly" acts as whip and spur to Essie's flagging courage. She retreats a few yards from the edge, in order

to get a little run to give her a better spring.

"As headstrong as an allegory on the banks of the Nile!" remarks Gerard, resignedly, quoting Mrs. Malaprop and folding his arms.

Neither the preparatory run, nor the tremendous bound she takes, avail to save Miss Craven from the fate which her obstinacy and the comparative shortness of her legs render unavoidable. She jumps short, and falls forward on the wet bank; her lavender kid gloves digging convulsively into it, and her legs disporting themselves fish-like in the brook.

He is at her side in an instant; raises gently and lifts her on to the grass, unmindful of the pollution caused to his coat by the muddy contact.

"What a fool I was!" she cries passionately, sinking down among a grove of huge burdock leaves, smothered in shame and angry blushes.

St. John thinks it rude to disagree with her, so holds his peace.

"Why don't you laugh at me? why don't you jeer me?" she continues, vehemently; "why don't you tell me you are very glad of it, and that I richly deserve it, as I see you are longing to do? Anything would be better than standing there like a stock or a stone!"

"It is not of much consequence how I stand or how I look," he replies, coldly. "It would be more to the purpose to know how you are to get home?"

"I will walk as I am," she cries impulsively, springing to her feet: "it will be a fit penance for my idiocy, and you shall go on ahead. I don't want you to be disgraced by being seen in company with such an object!"

"That is very probable, isn't it?" he answers, laughing good-humouredly. "No, I have a better proposition that that, I think. It has just occurred to me that an old servant of ours lives at no great distance from here, her cottage is not more than three or four fields off. If you can

manage to get there, she would dry your clothes for you in a minute."

Rendered docile by her late disaster, feeling very small, and hanging her head, Esther acquiesces. Her gown, from which every particle of starch or stiffness has fled, clings to her limbs and defines their form; the water drips down from her in a thousand little spouts and rivulets; bang, bang, go her soaked petticoats against her ankles at every step she takes.

"You have had almost enough of taking me out to walk, I expect," she remarks presently, rather grimly.

"You have had almost enough of jumping brooks, I expect," he retorts, drily; and then they walk on in silence till they reach a little whitewashed cottage, with its slip of potato ground and plot of pinks and marigolds and larkspurs—an oasis of tilled ground among the wilderness of pasturage.

St. John knocks at the half-open door and puts his head in. "Are you at

home, Mrs. Brown? How are you?" says he, in that frank, friendly voice that goes far to make the Felton tenants wish that Sir St. John reigned in Sir Thomas's stead.

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. St. John; I hope I see you the same," replies the person addressed, coming to the door with a jolly red face and a voluminous widow's cap that contradict one another; "it's a long time since we've seen you come our way."

"So it is, Mrs. Brown; but, you see, I have been after the partridges."

"And Sir Thomas, I hope he keeps pretty well, Mr. St. John?"

"Yes, thanks."

"And Miladi, I hope she has her health."

"Yes, thanks."

"And Miss Bl——"

"Yes, thanks," interrupts St. John, rather impatiently, breaking through the thread of her interrogatories. "Do you

see, Mrs. Brown, that this young lady has met with an accident: she has tumbled into the brook. Do you think you could let her dry herself at your fire a bit?"

"Eh dear, miss, you *are* in a mess!" ejaculates Mrs. Brown, walking round Esther, and surveying her curiously, as she stands close behind Gerard, dripping still, with hang-dog air and chattering teeth. "Why, you have not a dry stitch upon you; you are one *mask* of mud! Would you please to step in?"

Mrs. Brown and Essie retire into an inner chamber for the purpose of removing the wet clothes and replacing them temporarily with some of the contents of Mrs. Brown's wardrobe.

St. John remains in the outer room, looks at the clock, behind whose dial-plate a round china-moon-face peeps out; takes up the mugs on the dresser: "For a Good Boy," "A Keepsake from Melford," "A Present from Manchester,"

hiding amongst numberless gilt flourishes; chivies the tabby cat; counts the flitches of bacon hanging from the rafters; walks to the door, and watches the bees crawling in and out of the low door of their straw houses, and the maroon velvet nasturtiums trailing along the borders, and lifting their round leaves and dark faces up to the knees of the standard rose.

As he so stands, whistling softly and musing, some one joins him in the doorway. He turns and beholds Esther, bashful, shame-faced, metamorphosed. To Mrs. Brown's surprise, she has declined the magnanimous offer of her best black silk. There is nothing coquettish or picturesque, as she is aware, about an ill-made dress that tries to follow the fashion and fails—destined, too, for a woman treble her size. She has chosen in preference, a short, dark, linsey petticoat and lilac cotton bedgown, which, by its looseness, can adapt itself to the round

slenderness of her tall, lissom figure. Her bonnet was not included in the ruin of her other garments, but she has taken it off, as destructive to the harmony of her costume.

St. John surveys her for some moments: looks upward from petticoat to bedgown, and downward from bedgown to petticoat, but observes a discreet silence.

"Does it become me?" she asks at last, with shy vanity. "Why do not you say something?"

"I have been so unlucky in two or three of my remarks lately," replies he, with a concluding glance at the round, bare arms that emerge whitely from the short cotton sleeves, "that I have become chary of making any more."

"You need not be afraid of offending me by telling me that it is unbecoming," she says, gravely—"quite the contrary. I"—she continues rather discontentedly—"think that it suits me *too well*, as if it were a dress that I ought to have been

born to. Upon Miss Blessington now such a costume would look utterly incongruous."

St. John bursts out laughing. "A goddess in a bedgown! Diana of the Ephesians in a linsey petticoat! Perish the thought!"

Esther looks mortified, and turns away.

The cleansing of Miss Craven's garments is a lengthy operation. Mrs. Brown retreats into her back kitchen, draws forward a washtub, kneels down beside it, turns up her sleeves, and with much splashing of hot water and lathering of soap, rubs and scrubs, rings out, dries, and irons the luckless gown and petticoat.

It is latish and duskish by the time that St. John and his companion set out on their homeward way. Two or three starflowers have already stolen out, and are blossoming, infinitely distant, in the meadows of the sky. They are not loquacious: it is the little shallow rivulet that brawls; the great deep river runs still. Silently they walk along; her little feet trip softly

through the rustling grass beside him; the evening wind blows her light garments against him. He has taken her little gloveless hand as he helps her over a stile (adversity has made her abject, and she no longer spurns his assistance), and now retains it, half absently. Bare palm to bare palm, they saunter through the rich, dim land. It is dusk, but not so dusk but that they can see their dark eyes flashing into one another: sharp, stinging pleasure shoots along their young, full veins. The vocabularies of pain and of delight are so meagre, that each has to borrow from the other to express its own highest height and deepest depth. As they pass along a lane, whose high grass banks and overgrown hawthorn hedges make the coming night already come, Esther's foot stumbles over a stone. The next moment she is in his arms, and he is kissing her repeatedly.

"Esther, will you marry me?" he asks, in a passionate whisper, forgetting

to make any graceful periphrasis to explain his meaning, using the plain words as they rise in his heart.

No answer. Emotions as complicated as intense check the passage of her voice. Even here, on this highest pinnacle of bliss—pinnacle so high that she had hardly dared hope ever to climb there—the thought of Bob and his despair flashes before her: her own remarks about the senselessness of kissing—about its being a custom suited only to savages, and her own great aversion to it—recur to her with a stab of remorse.

"You won't?" cries St. John, mistaking the cause of her silence, in a voice in which extreme surprise and profound alarm and pain are mixed in equal quantities.

Still no answer.

"If you have been making a fool of me all this time, you might, at least, have the civility to tell me so," he says, in a voice so sternly cold that remorse,

coyness, and all other feelings merge into womanish fear.

"Don't blame me before I deserve it," she says, with a faint smile. "I will mar——"

She finishes her sentence on his breast.

Perfect happiness never lasts more than two seconds in this world; at the end of that time St. John's doubts return. He puts her a little way from him, that she may be a freer agent. "Esther," he says, "I half believe that you said 'yes' out of sheer fright; you thought I was going to upbraid you; and I am aware" (with a half smile) "that there are few things you would not do or leave undone to avoid a scolding; you did not say it readily, as if you were glad of it. I know that you have only known me three weeks, that I am not particularly likeable, especially by women, and that I always show to the worst possible advantage at home. All I beg of you is, tell me the truth: Do you like me, or do you not?"

"I do like you."

"Like is such a comprehensive word," he says, with a slight, impatient contracting of his straight brows. "You *like* Mrs. Brown, I suppose, for washing your clothes?"

"I like you better than Mrs. Brown."

"I did not doubt that," he answers, laughing; "probably you like me better than Sir Thomas, than my mother, than Constance, perhaps; but such liking as that I would not stoop to pick off the ground. I must be first or nowhere. Am I first?"

"No, you are not," she answers firmly.

His countenance falls, as Cain's did.

"I am not!" he repeats, in a constrained voice. "Who is then, may ask?"

"Jack, my brother—he is, and always will be!"

"Bah!" cries Gerard, laughing, and looking immensely relieved. "How you frightened me! I believe you did it on

purpose, as you said to me about the brook this afternoon. After him, am I first?"

"Yes."

"Before —— what's his name?—the fellow that writes such a remarkably good hand—before Brandon?"

"Why do you always worry me about him?" she exclaims, angrily, turning away.

"Why do you so strongly resent being worried about him?" retorts St. John suspiciously.

"It is wearisome to hear a person always harping on one string," she answers coldly. "Believe me or not, as you choose; but please spare me the trouble of these repeated and useless asseverations."

"I beg your pardon!" he says, his countenance clearing, and passing his arm round her half-shrinking, half-yielding form. "I will never dig him up as long as I live. Peace to his ashes! Oh darling!" he continues, his voice changing to an emphatic,

eager, impassioned key—"I have been so little used to having things go as I wish, that I can hardly believe it is I that am standing here. Pinch me, that I may be sure that I am awake! Oh Esther! is it really true? Can you possibly be fond of me? So few people are! Not a soul in the wide world, I do believe, except my old mother. The girl that I told you about last night lay in my arms, and let me kiss her as you are doing; she kissed me back again, as you do not do; I looked into her eyes, and they seemed true as truth itself, and all the while she was *lying* to me; my very touch must have been hateful to her, as it is to you, perhaps?"

"You are always referring to that—that *person*," says Esther, lifting great jealous eyes, and a mouth like a ripe cleft cherry, through the misty twilight towards him. "I perceive that I am only a *pis aller* after all. If you had ceased to care for her, you would have forgiven her long ago, and

have given up measuring everybody else by her standard."

"I have forgiven her fully and freely," he answers, magnanimously, and standing heart to heart with a woman

> "..... fairer than the evening air,
> Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;
> More lovely than the monarch of the sky,
> In wanton Arethusa's azured arms."

He may afford to be magnanimous. "I not only forgive her, but hale down blessings on her own and her plunger's ugly head. To be candid," he ends, laughing, "I forgave her a year ago, when I met her at Brainton Station, grown fat, with a red nose, and a tribe of squinting children, who, but for the finger of Providence interposing, might have been mine."

Speaking, he lays his lips upon the blossom of her sweet red mouth; but she, pricked with the sudden smart of recollected treachery, draws away from him.

"Come," she says, with a slight shiver, "let us go home. We shall get into

dreadful disgrace as it is; what will Sir Thomas say?"

"I can tell you beforehand," says St. John, gaily; "he will say, with his usual charming candour, that, if we ask his opinion, we are a couple of fools to go gadding about to strange churches just to see a parcel of lighted candles and squeaking little boys and popish mummeries; that, for his part, he has stuck to his parish church for the last fifty years, and means to do so to the end of the chapter; and that, if we don't choose to conform to the rules of his house, &c."

"Does he always say the same?" asks Esther, smiling.

"Always. A long and affectionate study of his character has enabled me to predicate with exactness what he will say on any given subject, Esther."

"How do you know that my name is Esther?" she asks, naïvely. "You have never heard any one call me so?"

"Do you forget the flyleaf of the

Prayer-book that—— Hang it! I was on the point of uttering the forbidden name!"

Smiling, he looks for an answering smile from her, but finds none.

"I have heard of you as Esther Craven from my youth up," he continues. "Before you came we speculated as to what 'Esther' Craven would be like; it was only when you arrived *in propriâ personâ* that you rose into the dignity of 'Miss' Craven."

"I hate being called Esther," she says, plaintively, with eyes down-drooped to the lush-green grasses that bow and make obeisance beneath her quick feet; "it always makes me feel as if I were in disgrace. Jack never calls me Esther unless he is vexed with me. Call me *Essie*, please."

"Essie, then!"

"Well?"

"I think it right to warn you" (putting an arm of resolute possession, bolder than ever poor Brandon's had been, round her

supple figure—for who is there in these grey evening fields to witness the embrace?)—"I think it right to warn you that I may very possibly grow like Sir Thomas in time; they tell me that I have a look of him already. I do not see that myself; but, even if that does come to pass, can you promise to like me even then?"

"Even then."

"I may very probably d—n the servants, and be upset for a whole evening if there are lumps in the melted butter; I may very probably insist on your playing backgammon with me every evening, and insist, likewise, on your being invariably beaten. Can you bear even that?"

"Even that."

They both laugh; but in Esther's laugh there is a ring of bitterness, which she herself hears, and wonders that he does not.

As they near the house, they see thin slits of crimson light through the dining-room shutters. Esther involuntarily quickens her pace.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" he asks, his eyes shining eager with reproachful passion in the passionless white starlight. "Who knows? to-morrow we may be dead; to-day we are as gods, knowing good and evil. This walk has not been to you what it has to me, or you would be in no haste to end it."

"I don't suppose it has," she answers, half absently, with a sigh.

He had expected an eager disclaimer, and is disappointed.

"There can be but one explanation of that," he says, angrily.

"If you only knew——," begins Esther, with an uncertain half-inclination to confess, though late.

"If you are going to tell me anything disagreeable," he says, quickly putting his hand before her mouth, "stop! Tell me to-morrow, or the day after, but not now—not now! Let there be one day of my life on which I may look back and say, as God said when He lookod back upon

His new world, 'Behold, it is very good!'"

She is silent.

"And yet, perhaps, it would be better if I knew the end of your sentence; if I only knew—what?—how little you care about me?"

"You are mistaken," she answers, roused into vehemence. "I love you so well, that I have grown hateful to myself!" and having spoken thus oracularly, she raises herself on tiptoe, lifts two shy burning lips to his, and kisses him voluntarily. Then, amazed at her own audacity, clothed with shame as with a garment, she tears herself out of his arms, as in delightful surprise he catches her to his heart, and flies with frenzied haste into the house.

CHAPTER III.

THE sweetness of September is that of the last few days spent with a friend that goeth on a very long journey; and we know not whether, when he returneth, we shall go to meet him with outstretched arms, or shall smile up at him only through the eyes of the daisies that flower upon our strait green graves.

"Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought,"

and our sweetest seasons are, to my thinking, those in which the ecstasies of possession are mixed with the soft pain of expected parting. A September sun—such a one as warmly kissed the quiet faces of our young dead heroes, as they lay thick together on Alma's

hill-side,—is shining down with even mildness upon the just and the unjust, upon Constance Blessington's grass-green gown as she sits at breakfast, and on the hair crown of yellow gold with which Providence has seen fit to circle her dull fair brows.

"I think that you must have regretted being in such a hurry to run away from the garden and us," she is saying, with a gentle smile of ladylike malice, to Esther, *à propos* of her yesterday's misadventure.

"Sitting in the shade eating nectarines is certainly pleasanter occupation than grovelling on your hands and knees on a mud-bank," replies Esther, demurely

"St. John is so terribly energetic!" says Miss Blessington, rather lackadaisically; "he would have walked me off the face of the earth long ago if I had let him."

Remembering the Chinese invitation, Esther cannot repress an involuntary smile.

"What about St. John?" says the young man, entering; having caught his own name, with that wonderful acuteness of hearing with which every one is endowed when themselves are in question.

"Much better have stuck to your parish church," says Sir Thomas, brandishing a large red and yellow bandana, which is part of the old English costume, "than gone scrambling heigh-go-mad over hedges and ditches after new-fangled Puseyite mummeries!"

Gerard and his betrothed exchange a glance of intelligence. Gerard is looking slightly sentimental; his head is a little on one side; but on his discovering that he is an object of attention to Constance, it returns rather suddenly to the perpendicular.

Esther's eyes are brillianter than their wont; her cheeks are flushed with a deeper hue than the crimson lips of a foreign shell, but it is not the flush of a newly-departed sleep. The angel of slum-

ber has passed by the portals of her brain, as the destroying angel passed by the blood-painted lintels of Israel. Thoughts sweeter than virgin honey, thoughts bitterer than gall, have kept her wakeful. Ere she went to bed, she spent three hours in writing letters of dismissal to Brandon, and at the end left him undismissed. "I *cannot* write it to him!" she cries, sitting up in bed in the dark, and flinging out blind arms into the black nothingness around her; "anything written sounds so harsh, so abrupt, so hard. I must tell him myself very gradually and gently, and tell him how sorry I am, and beg him to forgive me, and cry—go down on my knees, perhaps. No; I should look such a fool if I did that! After all, no one cries long over spilt milk—least of all any one so sensible and utterly unimaginative as poor dear Bob." And with that, thinking in a disparaging, hold-cheap way of him and his love, she turns the pillow

over to try and find a cooler place on the under side for her burning face to rest on.

* * * *

"Two dissyllabic names now passing many mouths by three dissyllabic names are here expressed," reads Miss Blessington, with distinct gravity, after breakfast that morning, out of an acrostic book that lies on the work-table before her, while Esther sits opposite with pencil and paper, ready to write down the products of the joint wisdom of their two minds. But the top of the pencil is being bitten by the young scribe's short white teeth, and her eyes are straying away absently—away through the open window and out to the sunshiny sward, where two of St. John's dogs, forbidden by Sir Thomas, on pain of death, to set paw within the house, are rolling over one another, making abortive bites at each other's hind legs, and waggishly, with much growling and mumbling, taking each other's heads into their mouths.

"That is the whole," continues Constance. "These are the proofs: a woman, a wise man, a king, a poet, a beauty!"

Silence.

"A woman!" says Miss Blessington, cogitatively, resting her smooth chin on her hand, and looking vaguely round at the cabinets and busts for inspiration.

Esther makes no suggestion.

"A woman!" repeats Miss Blessington, raising her voice a little.

Esther comes back to consciousness with a little jump. "Oh! I beg your pardon; I don't think I was attending. A——, what did you say?"

"A woman!" repeats Miss Blessington, for the third and last time.

"A woman!" echoes Esther, vacantly; that is rather vague, is it not? There have been a good many women, one way or another."

"Let us try the next, then," says Constance, obligingly: "A wise man."

"Solomon!" answers Esther, glibly.

"I said a *dis*syllabic name," remarks Constance, with gentle asperity.

The door opens, and St. John enters.

"Tell us a wise man's name?" "Who was a wise man?" cry they both in a breath.

"Solomon!" replies St. John, brilliantly.

"So I said," says Esther, smiling; "but, unluckily, it must be a *two*-syllabled wise man. I'm afraid that it would be disrespectful to abbreviate him into *Solmon*, wouldn't it?"

"One ought to be provided with a Bible, a Lemprière and an Encyclopædia before one attempts to grapple with these devices of Satan," says Gerard, sitting down on the arm of the sofa beside Constance and looking over her shoulder.

"A woman! Who is the woman?"

"We have not found out yet."

"A king! Who is the king?"

"We have not found out yet."

"You seem to be on the highroad to success," says he, laughing, and throwing himself back lazily.

"We have only just begun," says Miss Blessington, a little reproachfully. "You and Miss Craven are always so impatient."

"There are a great many two-syllabled kings' names," says Esther, with a prodigious effort to look intelligent and interested: "Edward, Henry, Louis, Ahab, Alfred, Joash!"

"I dare say it is one of those Jewish kings," says Constance, reflectively; "they are always fond of introducing Bible names into acrostics. Is there a Bible anywhere about, St. John?"

St. John walks slowly round the well-laden tables; looks over photograph books, Doré's "Elaine," Flaxman's "Dante;" but in vain. He comes back, and shakes his head.

"I will go and fetch one," says Constance, rising with noiseless grace, and rustling softly away among the console tables.

"May she long be occupied in searching the Scriptures for a dissyllabic king!" cries

Gerard, drawing a long breath, and yawning as the door closes behind her.

"I am glad she is gone," says Esther, looking rather embarrassed, "as I have something to say to you."

"Say on."

"I must go home to-morrow," she continues, drawing hideous faces and wooden-legged cows on her bit of paper.

"Are you beginning to try experiments on me already?" he asks, incredulously, leaning his folded arms on the little table which forms a barrier between them.

"No; but I have received a letter from Jack this morning, which——"

"Which you are going to read to me?"

"Oh no—no!" she answers hastily, putting her hand in involuntary protection over her pocket; "it—it—wouldn't interest you." (It would have interested him rather too much.) "He seems to be missing me a good deal."

"Be honest," says St. John, stretching out his hand and taking hers captive,

pencil and all. "Does he miss you as much as I shall?"

"More, a good deal, I should say," she replies, looking up with an arch smile; "I don't make your tea, and order your dinner, and darn your socks. One, two, three, four weeks," continues she, marking each number with her slender fingers on the table. "I have actually been here nearly a month, and" (with a half-absent sigh), "do you know, the very day I left home I told them——?"

"Who's them?"

She blushes furiously. "Them—did I say them? Oh! I meant *him*, of course —Jack."

"Does he always speak of himself in the plural, like a king or a reviewer?"

"Nonsense!" cries Esther, pulling away her hand rather impatiently. "Do you never make slips of the tongue?"

"Frequently. Well, you must write and tell *them*" (with a laughing emphasis on the *them*), "that they must get some

one else to darn their socks, for that you have found something better to do."

"I could not have anything better," she answers, reddening with indignation. "You don't understand about Jack, or you would not make jokes!"

"It is a fault I'm not often guilty of; being funny never was my besetting sin," he answers, drily. "Essie, whenever you do go home, I have a great mind to go with you—if you will invite me."

"Oh no, don't!" she cries, with involuntary eagerness, the pencil dropping from between her fingers.

"I believe you are ashamed of me," he says, angrily, walking off to the window to hide the flush of vexation which is invading his weather-worn cheeks.

"Ashamed of myself more likely," she cries, jumping up suddenly and following him.

"Why?"

"You fine gentlemen do not understand the

"Short and simple annals of the poor,"

she answers, with a forced laugh. "You would probably be in the position of Mother Hubbard's singularly ill-used dog;

'When you came there
The cupboard was bare.'"

"You think that gluttony, like gout, must be hereditary," says Gerard, laughing again, and yet looking very tender withal — not with the puling, milk-and-water tenderness of a green love-sick boy, but with the condensed, strong passion of a world-worn, world-tainted, half world-weary-grown man.

"There are other reasons too," says Essie, drooping her eyelids, over which the small blue veins—

"wandering, leave a tender stain—"

with a maiden's shyness, under the new-known fire of a lover's gaze.

"What other reasons?"

"I have never mentioned anything about

you to Jack!" she answers, twisting her one paltry ring round her finger. "I don't suppose he is aware of your existence, unless he has bought a new 'Baronetage' since I left home—a piece of extravagance that I do not think he is likely to have been guilty of: and he would think it so odd if I were to appear suddenly on the scene, dragging you in tow."

"That would be easily explained," replies St. John, gravely, drawing himself up, and looking rather too conscious of the eight centuries of Norman blood in his strong veins. "I suppose that a man may be allowed to travel for a few hours in company with his future wife without any one being straitlaced enough or behind the world enough to call it *odd!*"

"Your future wife!" she repeats, with a dreamy, mournful smile. "Am I that? I think not. I shall *never* be your wife," she says, a look of melancholy inspiration crossing and darkening, as a travelling cloud crosses and darkens the blue eyes of

a June brook, the sweet red and sweeter white of her little piquante face.

"Do you know any just cause or impediment why you should not be?" he asks, gaily.

"None," she answers, shuddering a little, as she has got into the habit of doing lately—"except" (throwing herself impulsively into his glad arms) "that it would make me so intolerably happy?"

There is a pause—a little brief pause—in which that shyest, fleetest-winged of earth's visitants—Happiness—folds her pinions and settles down for a little minute on two beating, trembling human hearts.

"Do you know," continues Essie, after awhile—raising herself, and looking up, with tears glistening, like dew on the autumn grass, upon her long swart lashes—"Do you know that in a book I was reading the other day I met this sentence: 'Le bonheur sur terre est un crime puni de mort comme le génie, comme la divinité?' It has haunted me ever since yesterday."

"As far as that goes," he answers, thoughtfully, "there is nothing in this world that is not punished with death, except Death himself. Well" (smiling fondly, and stroking her ruffled, scented love-locks), "may I come? may I be Mother Hubbard's dog?"

"Why do you want to come *now*, particularly?" she asks, in rather a troubled voice.

"Because I am a coward," he answers, laughing—"because I like a quiet life, and I imagine that there will be squally weather here when I announce my intention of taking you as a helpmeet for me."

"I *am* a *mésalliance*, I suppose?" she answers, rather sadly. "What will Sir Thomas say? Anything very bad?"

"Oh, nothing out of the way," answers Gerard, with a careless shrug. "He will call me an ass, and tell me that I always was, from a boy, the biggest fool he ever came across; and that, for his part, he'll wash his hands of me: and he'll probably

conclude with a threat of cutting me off with a shilling."

"And will he?" asks Esther, quickly, looking up eager-eyed, parted-lipped.

"Why do you ask?" said the young man, sharply.

"Do you think that I want to marry a *beggar?*" inquires she, playfully, not detecting his suspicion.

"You need not be alarmed," he replies, coldly, and his arms slacken their fond hold a little. "He will not, for the very excellent reason that he cannot."

The door-handle, turning, rattles. With one spring, Esther returns to her seat—to her deserted cows and impossible profiles. St. John looks out of the window. No transformation scene at Drury Lane could be more complete.

"Ahab—Jehu—Zimri—Omri—Joash!" recites Miss Blessington, entering, with an open Bible in her hand.

CHAPTER IV.

"I AM afraid you must think it very rude of us, leaving you alone on the last evening of your visit," says Miss Blessington next day to Esther, as the two girls stand together in the conservatory, picking bits of heliotrope and maidenhair, and regardless of the ten and twenty little pots that their long gowns have knocked down; "but, you see, it is such a long-standing engagement, and we can so seldom induce Sir Thomas to go to a ball, that we really could hardly get out of it."

She speaks politely, with that friendly suavity that one feels on the ultimate and penultimate days of their stay to a guest that one is glad to be rid of.

"Oh, never mind me," says Essie,

lightly; "I can always amuse myself: and, besides, it will be very nearly bedtime by the time you go."

"They intend me to go with them," St. John had said to her overnight, *à propos* of this ball, "and of course I intend it too; only some prophetic instinct tells me that my head will begin to ache prodigiously towards dressing-time. I am half-divided between that and toothache, only that I suppose the latter necessitates the simulating of acute bodily torture, and subjects one to unlimited offers of boiled figs, hopbags, laudanum, and the Lord knows what."

Gerard had found his betrothed stubborner than he had expected as to her expressed resolution of departure. Looking at the childish roundness of her soft face, at the dewy meekness of her heavenly eyes, he had fancied her malleable by his hand, as clay by the potter's; and so, in most things, she would have been. In most things, it was to her easier to yield

than to resist—less trouble—and, besides, it pleased people; but in the one prime passion of her life, her love for her brother, you might as well try to move the Tower of London with your finger and thumb as to stir her. After half an hour of arguments, persuasions, caresses, St. John is constrained vexedly to own to himself that in that young faithful heart *lover*-love holds as yet only the second place. The sole concession he could win from her was that of one day, the day of the ball.

"We may imagine the clock put on thirty years, and ourselves already in possession," he says, laughing—"only minus the gout and wrinkles and spectacles we shall also have come into possession of by then."

* * * *

"What the devil do people mean," says Sir Thomas, entering the morning-room that evening after dinner, with his hair brushed up into a stiff cockatoo, and

tugging away at a huge pair of white kid gloves, off which he has already succeeded in bursting both buttons, "dragging a man away from his own fireside to see a lot of fools cutting capers, and flourishing their heels in each other's faces?"

From Sir Thomas's description one would imagine that the Cancan was habitually danced at the balls he frequents.

The door opens, and Miss Blessington makes her appearance; looking, not vain or conscious, but, calmly defiant of any one to make a better—a triumph of lace and tulle and flowers, and milk-white flesh, and grand, cold curves and contours.

"Oh, how beautiful!" cries Essie, clasping her little hands, with the unaffected admiration of one handsome woman for another. "I know it is rude to make personal remarks; but is not she, Lady Gerard?"

"It is a pretty dress," replies miladi, whose unwieldy bulk not even the cunningest of Parisian *couturières* has been

able to fashion into anything nearer than an approximation to any shape at all; "but I never think that Elise's taste is as good as Jane Clarke's used to be."

Constance has walked to a pier-glass, and is examining with anxiety a bite that a gnat has been savage enough to inflict on her face, a little under the lower lip, and which has been disturbing her wonted composed serenity ever since 3 P.M., when the catastrophe took place.

"Does it show much?" she asks, turning with a concerned, serious look to Esther.

"Oh no! hardly at all."

"I think I will put a little bit of sticking-plaister on it," she continues, gravely. "It will only look like a patch; and patches are always so becoming."

"Let me go and get you a bit!" cries Essie, good-naturedly, running off.

When she returns Sir Thomas is saying, fussily: "Now, why is not that boy dressed? Always the same! Always late! Never in time for anything!"

"He is not coming, Sir Thomas; he has got a headache, and is gone to lie down—at least he said so," replies Constance, coldly, but casting a scrutinising glance at Esther (who is deftly, with a small pair of scissors, cutting out a little circle of sticking-plaister) as she speaks.

"Stuff and nonsense!" cries "that boy's" papa, angrily—"a pack of lies! A fine Miss Molly you have made of your son, miladi! He'll be afraid of going out shooting next for fear of getting his feet wet!"

"Is that about the right size?" inquires Esther, timidly, raising a pair of guilty pink cheeks, and exhibiting the result of her labours on the point of the scissors.

"Good God! miladi, do take that plaguy long tail of yours up! How the devil can I help treading on it?"

These are the last sweet words of Sir Thomas, as he follows wife and ward into the carriage. They are gone, and Essie sits down in the large empty room to await the resurrection of her lover. The

sort of shy half-fear which always assails her at his expected approach comes over her more strongly than ever. A distant door bangs faintly somewhere about the house; then another nearer. "He is coming!" she says to herself, and the quick blood rushes tingling to her fingers' ends.

It is a hot night, and the tall French windows stand unshuttered and open. Some impulse of timid coquetry urges her to flee from before him: she is ashamed that he should see the plain letters of joy written on her face at his coming: she would fain have yet a few moments of the happiness of expectancy, to whose delights those of reality are but seldom comparable. From the terrace a flight of stone steps leads down, with many a twist, to the mere. In a minute Essie has run lightly down, and is standing by the water's edge.

The dahlias are nodding their round drowsy heads, and the sentinel hollyhocks stand up stiff and pompous with their

clustered flower-spikes—rulers and law-givers among the flower-people: the little ripples are biting with playful tooth the low sedge-banks, and the tall bulrush forests, whence the coot and the waterhen families sailed out into life in the warm spring weather. To and fro rock the heavy, lazy water-lily leaves, whose bloom-time is past two months ago. Through her garden, the sky, the high moon walks stately, holding her silver lamp, in whose light all things shine deliciously.

Essie stands entranced. It seems to her like the intermediate residence of some happy soul, freed from the world's toil and moil, shrived from sin, emancipated from life, where it should dwell in tempered bliss till that last day when heaven's brighter glories, stronger raptures, should burst upon and clothe it for aye. She strolls along the narrow gravel path, bathing her hands with childish delight in the moonbeams, and then stoops and picks up two or three little stones

that the night's sweet alchemy has gifted with a bright short glory not their own. So stooping, she hears a man's quick firm foot running down the garden steps. She raises herself, and goes to meet him with "a moonlight-coloured smile" on her face. "Aren't they lovely?" she asks, holding up her pebbly treasures for him to look at.

Not speaking, he takes the little pink palm, stones and all, into his hand, and looks into her face; and, then, as if yielding to a temptation that he hates, that he would fain resist, and to which, being over-strong, he must yet succumb, he snatches her to his breast, and kisses her fiercely—eyelids, lips, and neck—with a violence he is himself hardly conscious of.

"Stop!" she cries, surprised, half-shocked, pushing him away from her. "What do you mean? You frighten me!"

He recollects himself instantly, and releases her. "It *is* alarming being kissed,

especially when you are not used to it," he answers, with a sneer.

She looks up at him in blank astonishment. Has he gone mad? Is it the moonlight that has given him that white wrathy look?

"Something has happened!" she says, quickly. "What is it? tell me!"

"Oh! nothing—a mere bagatelle!" he replies, with a little bitter laugh. "It is only that I have been hearing a pleasant piece of news."

"What is it?"

"Only that an acquaintance of mine is going to be married!"

"Is it an acquaintance of mine too?"

"About the most intimate you have, I should say: yourself, in fact!"

"Is that news?" she asks, trying to smile. "I *am* going to be married—am not I—to you?"

"I am not aware that my name is—Brandon," he answers, coldly, while his

sorrowful, fierce eyes go through her heart like poisoned arrows.

She turns her head aside and groans. A great vague darkness blots out the broad moon, and the stars' thick cohorts; the bright water beside her grows black as hell's sluggish rivers.

He had not known how much he had been buoyed up by hope till that mute gesture of hers bid him despair.

"It's true, then?" he asks, in a voice of sharp rage and anguish, catching hold of the white wonder of her arm, on which his fingers, unwittingly cruel, leave crimson prints.

"Is *what* true?" she asks, faintly, trying for yet a little longer to stave off Fate, to push away Nemesis, with her weak woman-fingers.

"That you are—God! am I choking?—engaged to Brandon?"

"I was once," she falters under her breath.

"How long ago?"

"When first I came here."

"And since then you have written to break it off?" he asks, while a tone of joyful hope vibrates in his deep voice.

"No, I have not," she answers, in a frightened whisper.

St. John's face gathers blackness. "I am to understand, then," he resumes, in a constrained voice, out of which the man's strong will keeps the pent passion from bursting forth, "that you belonged to him at the time when I kept you out of bed one night to listen to an interesting chapter in my own autobiography?"

"Yes."

"And when, in reply to my inquiries, you denied having any connection beyond common acquaintance with—with him?"

"Yes."

"And when you were good enough to overlook all trifling obstacles, and to consent to marry me?"

"Yes."

The little catechism ended, the last cob-

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web of doubt torn away, they stand dumb. Esther's guilty head sinks down on her breast as a flower's head sinks overladen with rain. Suddenly she looks up and stretches out her arms. "Speak to me!" she says, huskily. "Curse me! strike me! call me some bad name!—only speak!"

"I wish to God you were a man!" he answers, in a hard, low voice; while his straight brows draw together into one dark line across his face, and his lips look white and thin under his moustache.

"That you might *kill* me!" she says, incoherent with excitement. "Well, kill me now! If revenge is so pleasant to you, I give you leave!"

"Let us have no heroics, please," says he, contemptuously; "you don't appear to be aware that it is not the fashion for English gentlemen to murder women who make fools of them. It may be a sensible practice, but it is at present confined to the *tiers état*."

Having spoken, he makes a slight movement to depart.

"Are you going to give me up?" she cries, smiting her hands together, and forgetting in her great dismay to reflect whether the remonstrance accorded well with her dignity or not.

"I have no claim upon you!" he answers, icily.

"What do you mean?" she cries, passionately. "You are unjust. There could be nothing too bad for *him* to say of me, but what injury have I done you? You ought to thank me and praise me for having been wicked and dishonourable and double-dealing for your sake."

"For my sake!" he repeats, with a sardonic smile. "I am hardly so conceited as to take it personally."

"What do you mean?" she asks, quickly. "If I did not do it for your sake, for whose did I?"

He is silent.

"Do you mean," she inquires slowly,

her cheeks paling to the whiteness of snowdrops blowing, "that you think I gave him up because I wanted to be a grand lady—because I wanted to have all these fine things" (looking round at the flowering gardens, at the broad lake, at the stately house shimmering in the moonshine) "belonging to me?"

Still he holds his peace.

"Is that what you meant?" she repeats, urgently.

"I meant," he says, looking up, his eyes flashing with a hard metallic gleam, "that you thought a rich man a better investment than a poor one," and, being equally and conveniently indifferent to both, you thought it wisest to select the former."

"If such is your opinion of me," she says, turning away indignantly, "I don't wonder at your being in such a hurry to be rid of me!"

He looks askance at her out of the corners of his eyes. She has hidden her face in her hands, but by the panting

breast and heaved white shoulder he sees that she is weeping—that a storm of sobs is shaking her childish frame.

"I am in a hurry to be rid of you!" he says harshly, steeling himself against her. "From a woman who could throw a man over with the deliberate, cold-blooded heartlessness you have done, one may well sing 'Te Deum' for being rescued in time."

She flings up her little head proudly, and the dusk splendour of her eyes blazes through great tears. "Listen to me!" she says, laying hold of his arm with one small burning hand. "I am a bad girl, I know, but I am not the calculating, mercenary wretch you take me for. I tell you honestly that the first day I came here—I had never been staying at a great house before—I thought it must be pleasant to live in large rooms, and have gilt and ormolu and fine pictures about one, and to have carriages and horses and servants, and not to be obliged to think twice before one spent sixpence; and I thought too"

(her long neck droops, and she blushes painfully as she makes the confession) "what a pity it was that I was already engaged, for that otherwise, as I was pretty, you might have taken a fancy to me——" She stops, choked with maiden shame. Upon his averted face an enduring flush, like a hectic autumn leaf's, burns red and angry.

"But as soon as I saw you, almost," she continues, commanding her tears with great difficulty—"as soon as you spoke to me, all such thoughts went out of my head. I don't know why they did," she says, simply. "You were not particularly pleasant or civil, I did not think you good-looking, and you gave me the idea of being ill-tempered; but" (with a sigh) "one cannot reason about those sort of things. I began to think so much about what you *were*, that I forgot to remember what you had."

He makes no comment upon her confession.

"Do you believe me?" she asks, eagerly, her little fingers tightening their clasp upon his coat-sleeve.

Still he is dumb.

"Do you?" she repeats, excitedly, the quick breath passing to and fro pantingly across the threshold of her crimson lips.

"Why do you insist on making me uncivil?" he says, with a sarcastic smile. "I do *not* believe you. I dare say you fancy you are telling truth; but if another man were to come on the scene with a few thousands a-year more, and a higher position in the social scale, you would enact the same part over again. Women must be true to their instincts; those who are bent on rising must kick down the ladder by which they have climbed: it is an irreversible law."

"You are mistaken," she says, eagerly. "I have no desire to climb: if I came here with any silly, childish idea that rich people were happier than poor ones, I have been quite disillusioned. Bob" (how

oddly the little unromantic name comes in among her heroics!)—"Bob is a happier man than you are, though he is only a lieutenant in a foot regiment, and has next to nothing to live upon."

"I have no doubt that *Bob*" (with a little sneering emphasis on the monosyllable) "is in all respects a very superior person to me," says St. John, with a bitter pale smile, like a gleam of wrathful sunlight on a day of east wind and clouds and driving sleet.

"I quite agree with you," she answers hastily, her great eyes flashing angry, like unwonted meteors that blaze fitful in the winter sky, "and I wish to Heaven I had never left him!"

Over Gerard's features a spasm, contracting and puckering them, passes ugly and painful; his hands clench themselves in the mightiness of his effort to govern his smitten soul. "That is easily remedied," he answers, after a little pause, in a clear cold voice. "Why should not

you go back to him as you came? There is no reason why he should ever hear of this—this *episode*, this *interlude*, this *farce*."

"And you think that I am to be bandied about like a bale of goods!" she cries, scornfully, voice trembling and lip quivering with passion. "You are like the woman in the Judgment of Solomon, who said, 'Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it!' *You* love me! You never did!"

"Perhaps not," he answers, with slow difficulty; "perhaps what I loved was my ideal that I fancied I had found in you, and when I found I was mistaken, perhaps the love went too! My God! I wish it had!"

Through the proud calmness of his voice penetrates a tone of bitter, unwilling tenderness. Hearing it, her whole soul is melted into fresh, quick tears.

"It is not my ideal, or any one else's, that I love in you!" she cries, stretching

out eager white arms towards him; "it is yourself—your very self! Oh, if I could but tear out my heart and show it you! Oh! why won't you believe me?"

He looks at her—looks at the innocently-wooing arms, at the tear-stained, dimpled, tremulous face—and feels his resolution wasting away like wax before the fire, as Samson's wasted away in Delilah's lap. He turns his eyes away across the cool silvered flood, and hardens his heart against her.

"Why cannot you?" she repeats, in her sweet vibrating voice.

"Because I have not the faith that removes mountains," he answers, harshly; "because a thing must be probable, or at least possible, before I can give credit to it; because I am unable to understand how, for a man whom you confess to having thought ill-looking, ill-tempered, and ill-mannered, you could, out of pure disinterested love, throw over one to

whom you must, at least, have pretended to be sincerely attached."

"I never pretended anything of the kind," she answers, vehemently. "If you don't believe me, ask him. I was engaged to him because he seemed unhappy, and because I did not see any particular reason why I should not, and because he asked me."

Through all his bitter, surging wrath, St. John can hardly forbear a smile. "And you became engaged to me because I asked you?" he says, drily. "At that rate, there is no reason why the number of your aspirants should not be increased *ad infinitum*."

"And were you going to play the play out to the end, may I ask, and *marry* us both?" he inquires, in the same cutting key.

No woman can stand being sneered at: she much prefers having the tables and chairs flung at her head.

"Do you think it manly or witty to

jeer at me," cries Essie, stung almost to madness by his taunts, "because I have been fool enough to desert for you a man worth a hundred of you?"

Gerard stands motionless in the moonlight, with folded arms, and a chill, painful smile on his stern mouth. "I have already announced my conviction of his superiority, and have advised you to return to him," he says.

"Do you mean *really?*" asks Essie, her wild, wide eyes flaming in half-incredulous fear on his face.

"I do," he answers, with icy steadiness.

"And you have done with me altogether?" she says, brokenly, her tears forcing their way through her slight shielding fingers, and falling one after another, slow and heavy, on the stones at her feet. "Serve me right!—Serve me right!"

Once again, intoxicated by her great fairness, he goes nigh to pardoning her;

once again his obstinate will comes to his aid. "If I were to marry you now," he says, resolutely, "my life would be one long suspicion: I should love you madly, and should disbelieve in you."

With that, and his saying he should love her madly, a little creeping hope steals warmly about her heart. "Why should you disbelieve in me?" she asks, putting out a timid, peace-making hand.

"Because a faith once broken can never be mended," he answers, sternly—"it may be patched up, but a patched faith will not do to go through life with; because a woman who has deceived a man once for one object may deceive him a second time for another. I should never," he says (words coming quicker and emotion deepening as he proceeds), "look in your sweet eyes without thinking I read some treachery in them; I should never press your heart against mine without fearing that it was beating for some one else."

She withdraws her rejected hand, and falls to weeping sorelier than ever, but very mutely.

"What madness induced you to tell me so many lies?" he cries, passionately, with mournful severity. "Were you bent on putting a gulf, that could never be bridged through all eternity, between us? Did not you know that that is the one sin I could never forget or forgive?"

She looks down humbled and crestfallen, and says, sobbingly, "I was afraid of you. I thought that, if I told you, I should lose you, as I have done now, without telling you. I was on the point of speaking two or three times, but you looked so angry that my courage failed, and I *dared* not."

"Afraid of me!" he says, reproachfully. "By your own showing, then, you could not have loved me perfectly, for 'perfect love casteth out fear.' If you are afraid of me, it is indeed time for us to part."

"I see you are bent on misconstruing every word I say," she says, hopelessly,

and yet with a little petulant movement of shoulder and head, "and so I'll hold my tongue."

He looks at her, not relentingly, but with infinite sadness. "I almost wish that Constance had left me in my Fool's Paradise!" he says.

"Constance!" exclaims Esther, quickly. "Was it she that told you?"

"It was," he answers, quietly: "she heard it this morning; she was annoyed with me for not going to the ball, and chose this ingenious and, I must say, complete mode of revenge."

"What *had* I done to her?" says Essie, bringing her two hands together sharply, and looking upwards to Heaven's great, black, blue floor above her,

"Thick inlaid with patines of bright gold."

"What *had* I done to her," she says, in a sort of wonder, "that she should do me such a mischief?"

Looking at her as she stands with up-

turned eyes, like some sweet prayerful saint or penitent Magdalen, drawn by a cunning hand that has been resolved three centuries back into elemental dust—dust that has stopped a bunghole perhaps, like Alexander's—Gerard's resolution breaks a little: not his resolution of parting from her—*that* remains firm as ever—but his power of so parting with nonchalant coldness. "Child!" he cries, a little roughly, and yet with a half-groan, placing a hand heavily on each of her shoulders—"Child! why are you so pretty? If it was your nature to be deceitful and underhand, why could not you be ugly too? Your beauty is the one thing about you that I believe in, and it drives me distracted!"

"And yet," she answers, with a melancholy smile, "you told me just now, very calmly, to go back to—to *him:* you seemed to contemplate with great equanimity the prospect of seeing me and my *distracting beauty*" (with a bitter emphasis) "in another man's possession."

"You are mistaken," he answers, with quick violence. "By God's help, I'll never see you again after to-night!"

Hearing that heavy sentence, her knees tremble beneath her a little; a momentary dimness comes over her eyes; voice, breath, and heart seem to suspend their functions. No word of protest, of lamentation, of entreaty, crosses her whitened lips.

"What right have I to be with you?" he asks, indignantly—"I, who cannot see you without coveting you? What right have I to steal another man's wife, any more than his horse or his money?"

"Let me go, then," she answers, with a low moaning sigh—"since it must be so. You know what is right better than I do. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" he answers, very shortly, and turns away his head sharply, that only the lake and the stars may see the distortion that the passion of that parting is working on his face.

"Say you forgive me before I go!" says

the tender, tremulous voice, that might unman a hero—might unsaint an anchorite, —as she lingers yet a little minute beside him.

"Why should I say what is not true?" he asks, turning round roughly upon her. "I don't forgive you, and never shall, either in this world or the next."

"You must!" she says, sobbingly, the words coming a little wildly through a tempest of tears. "I cannot go unless you do; if I went now, I should remember you all my life as you are to-day; to-day would blot out all the happy hours we have been together!"

For all answer, he turns away from her, and buries his face in his hands.

"Look at me kindly once again!" she says, calmness growing out of her strong emotion, putting up her two small hands and trying to draw his away from before his hidden face. "I may be very wicked; I suppose I am—as you say so—mean, underhand, deceitful; but yet, for the

sake of what is gone, look at me kindly once again: that won't hurt you, as it is for the very last time!"

Still Gerard remains speechless — not from obstinacy, but because he cannot command his voice: and his pride revolts from speaking shakily, quaveringly, like an hysterical woman or paralytic old man.

"If I were a thief, or a murderer," she says, indignantly, withdrawing her hands, "you could not turn from me with greater loathing!"

"You are a murderer," he answers, with fierce vehemence, looking at her once again as she had asked him—looking at her with wrathful, reluctant passion, but not kindly. "You have murdered my whole future — my hope, my belief in women, in truth—my everything of life but what is merely animal. If you had murdered my body I could have forgiven you much more easily. Time or disease must have done that sooner or later, but now—" He stops abruptly.

"If I am a murderer, I am a suicide too," she replies, with a smile more tearful than her tears. "St. John," she says, earnestly, "don't you know that people always attend to dying requests, however foolish and unreasonable they may be? This of mine is a dying request, for after to-night I shall be dead to you. Say, 'Essie, I forgive you.'"

"What is it to you whether I forgive you or not?" he inquires, sullenly, with a certain savage pulling and biting of his moustache. "Are you mistaking me for Brandon again? Why should two indifferent acquaintance like us go through the farce of begging each other's pardons? What are we to one another?"

"Nothing," she answers, calmly; "you need not be so eager to remind me of that; my memory needs no refreshing; but we *have been* something—do what you will you cannot take that away from me—so for the sake of that 'have been,' say you forgive me!"

"Falsehoods don't pass my lips so glibly as they do yours," he answers, doggedly. "If I were to say, 'I forgive you' a thousand times, I should be no nearer the doing it. Good-bye!" he says again, abruptly, putting out his hand; feeling that the strain is too great for him, and that if it last much longer he, being but human, will break under it. Her answering farewell is to fling herself upon his breast.

"I can no more say 'good-bye.'" she says, desperately, in a passionate whisper, "than you can say 'I forgive you.' St. John, take me back, try me once again! I know I ought not to say it—that it is undignified, unwomanly, perhaps—but I cannot see my everything going away from me without reaching out a hand to stop it. Oh, my darling! give me one more trial!"

Her arms cling about his brown throat close as the bindweed clings about the hedges in sultry August; her white warm

breast heaves and pants against his, as the sea heaves and pants against the shore's tawny sides; her eyes, impassioned as only dark eyes can be—alluring, despairing—flame into his eyes, and down through his eyes into his heart. Prisoned in those sweet, frail fetters, he feels strength and name and fame ebbing from him, as Merlin's ebbed under Vivien's wily charm.

"Is not it better to be tricked by such a woman," Passion whispers, "than to spend long æons of unswerving fidelity with one less maddeningly fair? Were not such moments of ecstacy very cheaply purchased, even by years of suspicion and deceit?" But Will and Honour push her back with their strong right hands. "She has deceived you once, and therefore she will deceive you twice. She is enacting *this* melodrama on *your* breast: she may enact the next on another man's. Put her away!—put her away!"

Hearkening to them, he, with a groan

as of one that teareth out his right eye, with relentless fingers unfastens her arms from about his neck. "*Your* darling!" he says, contemptuously; "you are forgetting whom you are addressing!"

"I am, indeed," she answers, with a sudden revulsion of feeling; "but it is a mistake that one does not make twice in a lifetime."

"I hope not," he answers, taking refuge in surly rudeness from the almost overpowering temptation to fall at her feet and say, "Essie, come to me! deceive me! outwit me! overreach me! do what you please, I cannot help it! If there were a thousand Brandons and ten thousand treacheries between us, I *must* be yours, and you *must* be mine!"

"I have degraded myself once to the dust before you," rejoins Essie, in a voice that tries to be angry, but is only trembling; "but there is no fear of my doing it again. And yet," she continues, after a pause, her soft nature making it more

difficult for her to part from him in anger than to incur his contempt by again descending to supplication—"and yet, since I have confessed to having been wicked, you might as well forgive me. How much the better will you be for going through life with the consciousness that you have made one wretched woman even more unhappy than she would otherwise have been? You forgave that other girl who deceived you because she did not love you. Forgive me, who deceived you, because I loved you too well!"

"I forgave her," he answers, sternly, "because I had ceased to care about her—because what she stole from me had lost its value. Perhaps at some future period I may be in the same frame of mind towards you; at present I am some way off it. I neither can forgive you, nor have I the slightest wish to do so!"

Seeing that she is abasing herself in vain, she refrains. "Well, then, since you wish it, so it must be," she answers,

with meek despair; and catching suddenly his hand before he has time to prevent her, she kisses it very humbly and sorrowfully. Then, unforgiven, unrecalled, she passes away. And Gerard, the battle over, the victory won, sits down on a garden-seat, and cries like a child for his pretty lost plaything.

CHAPTER V.

And so that act of the play is finished: all the actors have strutted and fumed and fretted through their little parts, and now the curtain has fallen. When next it rises, the principal actress in this tragic drama is discovered lying full-dressed on her bed; her pretty face buried—eyes and nose and mouth—in the tumbled pillow; her little neat-shod feet hanging over the bedside. She looks as if she had been thrown there, an inert passive mass, by some spiteful giant. Six miles away, at Lord ——'s ball, the fiddles are squeaking, and the pink-and-green Chinese lanterns swinging to and fro among the orange boughs in the slight wind made by the rustling dresses

and passing men and women. Sir Thomas, with his hands in their burst white gloves under his coat-tails, and his blue-cloth back leaning against a marble mantelpiece, is talking sweetly, in his hard, rasping voice, of scab and footrot. Miladi is gone down to supper for the sixth time on the sixth devoted married man's arm; she is eating game pie, and drinking sherry and champagne and moselle in turns. Miss Blessington, sweeping about on the arm of a small white gentleman, whose estate is as large as his person is minute, is responding a little superciliously to a presumptuous younger son, who, annihilated by her Greek profile and Juno bust, has invited her to tread a measure with him.

"No, tha—anks; I never da—ance round da—ances."

Meanwhile Esther lies stretched upon the counterpane, while a gloomy pageant of all that she has lost passes before her eyes. Greedier than the dog in the fable,

she had tried to keep shadow and substance: Gerard's love, Brandon's liking. Now, lo! both have fallen into the water. There are a few circles, a few rising bubbles; then all is over—gone, sunk to the bottom, to come up again never more. Vanished from her grasp is the great house—are the buhl and marqueterie cabinets—are the "Venus surprised by Satyrs" and the "Susanna and the Elders"—are the vineries, pineries, peacheries. Did they ever exist? or were they only a mirage, such as the sky presents to us sometimes—a mirage of ships shocking together, of armed men meeting in fight?

"Go back to your pigstye!" said the magic fish to Ilsabil, the fisherman's wife, when she modestly requested to be made lord of the sun and moon. "Go back to your pigstye!" cries Fate to Esther. At any other time the subsiding from the prospect of being rather a great lady into the certainty of being a very small one would have caused considerable annoyance

to Esther's aspiring soul. *Now*, the *things* she has lost merge and lose themselves in the *person* she has lost. But is he lost necessarily, irrecoverably? Despite the forlorn attitude, the tear-swollen face, trying to suffocate itself in down, Hope is busy whispering, "You will see him again to-morrow: men in real life are not like men in novels—changeless of purpose, hard as iron or adamant. What they are one half-hour, they are the exact reverse of the next; what they swear to-night they will unswear to-morrow." As Hope, the deceiver, thus murmurs, there comes to her ear the sound of wheels briskly rolling to the door. "Is the ball over so early? are they come back already? or ——?" She does not give herself time to speculate on any other hypothesis, but, springing from the bed, runs to the window, draws aside curtain and blind, and looks out. The hall-door is open; a vehicle stands before it. The moonlight and the light shed from the hanging lamp

in the portico are fighting together, struggling for possession of a horse and dogcart, of two footmen's floured heads, and of a portmanteau and hat-box that they are carrying out. "Thud! thud!" she hears the portmanteau go in at the back of the cart. Then a man comes out—a man in hat and overcoat—drawing on dogskin gloves, and saying, "John, go and look for my box of cigar-lights; I left it on the smoking-room table." It is St. John, speaking in much his usual voice. He is going away! going away! and he can think of his cigar-lights! Her heart stops pulsing for a second, then sets off galloping at the rate of a hundred and twenty a minute. Going without making any sign! She leans farther out of the window, and rests her white arms, that look whiter than any lilies in the moonlight, on the sill. He is so close beneath her, if the servants were not there, she might call to him; as it is, he will never know that she has watched his departure. A sudden impulse

prompts her to throw up the window higher, to rustle her dress, to cough, in order to attract his attention. At the unexpected noise John and Thomas turn their heads and look up, but their master does not. He gives a slight start, but, instantly recovering himself, walks steadily to the cart and gets in. Then she knows that he knows that she is looking at him —knows that he is resolute to part from her—

"taking no farewell—"

as Lancelot took none of Elaine.

The horse is a little fidgety at starting. "Wo-o-o! Gently, old lass!" This is the affecting form that St. John's last words take. She cranes her neck out of the window; she leans out her litho body, reckless of the danger of losing her balance and tumbling on the hard gravel-drive below, in her eagerness to catch the last glimpse of the lessening, dwindling bulk; then, forgetting to shut the window, care-

less of any cold or stock of rheumatism that she might be laying up for herself, she returns to her former position, flings herself again prone on the bed, again buries her face in the pillow; but this time no beguiling hope sits and whispers pleasant falsities to her. Hope got up upon the dogcart and drove away with Gerard.

The night wanes; morning dreams, that they say come true, invade many sleepers' brains. At Lord ——'s ball people are still dancing with the fury produced by champagne and supper; but Sir Thomas, Miladi, and Miss Blessington, are at home again and in bed. Constance is not one of those hard dancers who think that one after-supper galop is worth ten ante-cœnal ones. Not for all the entrancing valses Strauss ever composed would she run the risk of damaging the freshness of her toilette, nor the still more serious risk of exchanging the marble coolness of her cheeks for the unsightly flush of heat or the ugly pallor of exhaustion.

Dawn is just beginning stealthily to unlatch the eastern gate; her torch, new-lit, makes but a puny opponent for the night's one great and myriad lesser lamps. Esther has fallen into an uneasy doze, her damp brow and loosened hair resting on her bare outflung arm. Suddenly a knock at her door makes her start up in a vague, confused horror. Is it St. John come back? Is it some one come to murder her? A thousand impossibilities flash across her bewildered brain. Without waiting for permission, the person who knocked enters; not St. John, nor a murderer—only a dishevelled housemaid, who has evidently just thrown a gown over her night attire, and endeavoured abortively to gather up the straggling hair out of her sleepy eyes under a muslin cap put on awry.

"A tallygraph for you, miss!" says she, coming forward, holding in one hand a blue envelope, and in the other a tall, solemn, tallow candle, as sleepy as herself.

A telegraphic message! Oh hateful telegraph! Cruellest of modern inventions! Oh hastener of evil tidings, that, without you, come all too speedily! Oh maker of sick hearts and blanched cheeks and arrested pulses!

Esther snatches it, while a sudden, awful cold grasps her heart, and reads by the wavering, feeble light these words, in a scrawly clerk's hand:

"Robert Brandon to Esther Craven. Come home instantly; Jack is very ill."

With how few pen-strokes can a death-warrant be written! For a moment she sits bolt upright, void of breath or motion, as a white dead woman from the house of whose fair body the spirit departed an hour ago; the telegram grasped in a stiff hand that knows not of it. Then conciousness returns, brought back by a huge, tearing, killing, agony; then even the agony yields to one intense, consuming longing—one all-dominating purpose -- the longing to slay time and space; to

be with him *now*, this instant; to be beside Jack dying, not Jack dead.

"Can I see Sir Thomas?" she asks collectedly, but in a rough, deep voice. "I have had bad news from home: my brother is very ill."

"Indeed, 'm, you don't say so!" replies the servant, growing broadly awake under the delightful excitement of a calamity having happened to somebody, and of herself being the first recipient of the news.

"I *must* see Sir Thomas!" Esther says, putting her hand up in a bewildered way to her head, and then springing off the bed and walking quickly towards the door.

"See Sir Thomas," repeats the woman, the most unfeigned alarm painting itself on her broad face—"*now!* Indeed, ma'am, you must be mad to think of such a thing! It would be as much as all our places are worth if he were to be disturbed before his usual time."

Esther turns and clutches her arm,

while her great eyes brimful of despair, burn on her face. "I tell you my brother is *dying!*" she says, hoarsely—"I know he is; I must go to him *this minute;* for God's sake help me to get to the station!"

"Indeed, 'm, I'm sorry to see you in such trouble, *that* I am!" answers her companion, moved to compassion by the terrible, haggard misery of the young round face, that she, in company with her fellow-servants, had often admired in its happy, dewy rosiness at prayers on Sunday evenings; "but, you see, all the men are in bed, and Simpson 'ud cut off his own 'ead afore he'd venture to take out the carriage without Sir Thomas's orders."

The tall yellow candle flares between them; lights up the tortured beauty of the one woman, the placid, fat stolidity of the other. Esther groans, and smites her hands together.

"Is there *no* vehicle I can have?" she asks in impatient agony—"no cart?—no

anything? I'd give all I have in the world to any one who would take me. Oh God! how many minutes I am wasting!"

The housemaid puts down her flat candlestick on the table, and rubs her forehead with her rough forefinger to aid her thinking powers. "There's the dogcart that the under-servants goes to church in," she says presently, with an uncertain suggestion; "if we could knock the men up, you might have *it*, perhaps."

"Knock them up this instant, then!" cries Esther, with passionate urgency—"*now*, *this minute!* Go, for God's sake!"

So saying, she almost pushes the woman out of the room, and herself follows her. Through long passages and corridors, full of emptiness and darkness—darkness utter and complete, save where through the gallery's high-stained east window the chilly, chilly dawn comes peeping, with a grey glimmer, about the black frames, never-closing eyes, and stiff,

prim simpers of the family portraits—down to the lower regions, where the huge kitchen-grate yawns, black as Erebus—up steep back-stairs along other passages. In one of these passages Esther stands, her frame trembling and teeth chattering with cold and nervous excitement, while her companion raps with broad, hard knuckles on a door, and loudly calls on Simpson to awake. But hard workers are hard sleepers, and it is some time before the coachman can be induced to leave the country of slumber. When at length he is aroused, and has come out to them, in all the yawning sulkiness of disturbed sleep, it is a still longer time before he can be induced to admit the possibility of *any* vehicle whatever being put at Esther's disposal: with so righteous a fear of his wrath has Sir Thomas succeeded in inspiring his subordinates.

It is not without the aid of all her remaining money, with the exception of what

is needed for the purchase of her railway ticket—not without the aid of all that is left of poor Jack's hardly-spared five-pound note—that she is able at length to induce him to consent to the getting ready of the dogcart "in which the under-servants goes to church." Fully three-quarters of an hour more elapse before one of the helpers can be knocked up, can dress himself, can harness the oldest and screwiest horse in the stables, and put him, with many a muttered grumble, into the cart. Wretched Esther follows the man and his lanthorn to the stable-yard, with the vain idea that her presence may hurry his movements. During most of the three-quarters of an hour she walks quickly up and down over the hard round stones with which the yard is paved, or stands watching, with greedy eyes, every step in the harnessing process; while her hands clench themselves, as his are clenched who is dead by some very cruel, violent death, and a pain like a red-hot, two-bladed knife keeps running

through her heart. Before the horse is well between the shafts, she has climbed into the cart, and taken her seat.

"The luggage is not in yet, 'm," suggests the groom respectfully.

"Oh! never mind the luggage," cries Esther, feverishly; "I don't want it! I don't want anything! I'm ready! Get in, please, and set off this minute!"

Dawn is breaking, slowly, coldly, greyly, without any of the rose-coloured splendours that mostly gild the day's childhood, as the glorious delusions of youth gild our morning. There has not been a positive, actual frost in the night—not frost enough to congeal the wayside pools or to kill the dahlias—but the air has, for all that, a frosty crispness, as of the first breath of coming winter. The trees and hedgerow holly-bushes loom gigantic, formless, treble and quadruple their real size, folded round and round in a mantle of mist; the meadows are like lakes of mist; sheets of vapour steaming damply up to the shape-

less, colourless, low-stooping heavens. Esther has forgotten to take any wrap: through the poor protection of her thin cotton dress and jacket the mist creeps slowly, searchingly, making her limbs shake and shudder; but she herself is unconscious of it—she could not have told you afterwards whether she had been warm or cold.

At the turnpike gate a sleepy old man comes hobbling out (men at toll-gates are mostly one-legged), in his hand a candle, to which the white morning is beginning to give a very sickly, yellow look: it seems to Esther that he will never have done fumbling in his breeches-pocket for the sixpence of change that eludes his search.

"Why do you stop? Cannot you go a little quicker?" asks Esther, hoarsely, her teeth chattering with cold and misery, as the groom allows his horse to walk up a long gentle incline.

"Sir Tummas allus gives pertikler horders as we should walk the 'orses up

this 'ill," replies the man; "you see, 'm, its collar-work pretty nigh all the way from our place to Brainton."

"But it is such a little hill, and Sir Thomas need never know," pleads Esther, imploringly. "I have not got any money now, but if you'll take me quicker—a good deal quicker—I will send you five shillings—ten shillings—by post when I get home."

"Much obliged to you, ma—am," answers the man, touching his hat, and giving another instance of the influence of filthy lucre by whipping up his horse.

"When is the next train to Berwyn?" cries Esther, almost before they had pulled up at the station, to a porter, who stands waiting to receive any arriving passengers.

"7.20," replies the man, briefly.

"And what time is it now?"

"6.15."

"Is not there one before 7.20?"

"None; you are just too late for the 6.10 one; it has been gone about five minutes."

Unmindful of the presence of the careless, indifferent on-lookers, Esther clasps her cold hands together and groans. In a great despair, as in a great bodily agony, we do not much mind who sees or hears us.

"Too late!" she says, with a heavy, tearless sob—"five minutes too late! Oh God, it *is* hard!"

"Any luggage, miss?" asks the porter, in his civil, matter-of-fact voice.

The commonplace question brings her back to life. "No, none," she answers, collecting herself; and so saying walks into the station, and, taking refuge in the waiting-room, sinks down upon a green Utrecht velvet chair.

Owing to the earliness of the hour, other occupant of the room is there none; neither is there any fire (a fire always looks in good spirits; it never has the blues). Alongside of the empty fireplace stands a stiff green Utrecht velvet sofa, and round the bare table more green Utrecht velvet

chairs. Opposite to Esther, against the wall, hangs a roll of texts. Involuntarily her haggard eyes lift themselves to them, and light upon this one—which, under the slightly inappropriate title of "Encouragements to Repentance," heads the list: "Woe is me, for I am undone!" She shudders, "Is it an omen?" turns away her head quickly, and tries to look out of window, but the wire-blind hinders her gaze. Once again, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" standing out clear and black in large type from the white paper, greets her eyes. She can bear it no longer, but rising hastily, runs out, and begins to walk swiftly up and down the platform.

Brainton is a large station—a junction of many lines. Engines are snorting and puffing about; boilers letting off steam, with a noise calculated to break the drum of any ear; tarpaulin-covered waggons standing shunted on side lines. A train has just come in, and is disgorging its human load; a man with a hammer is

walking along by the side of it, stooping and tapping the wheels; porters are driving luggage-piled trucks before them, and shouting out, "By your leave!" to any unwary traveller who may cross the relentless path of their Juggernaut: other porters are enduring and answering, with angelic patience and *bonhomie*, the agitated and incoherent questions of unprotected females in waterproof cloaks and turn-down hats. Everybody and everything is rampantly *alive;* even to his handiwork, man seems to have imparted some of his own intense vitality: to the engines he has given motion and voice—motion and voice ten thousandfold stronger than his own.

In her hurried walks, Esther suddenly comes face to face with a fair-haired youth, who, followed by a porter carrying a gun-case, is walking lightly along with his hands in his pockets, whistling for very lightheartedness,

"I paddle my own canoe."

Jack's tune! What business has he to whistle it? All fair-haired youths, with nothing very prominent in any of their features, are more or less alike; and this amount of resemblance the unknown bears to her boy. Long after he has passed her, amid the shrieking of the engines, the shouts of the porters—"Take your seats for Wolverhampton, Birmingham!" "All here for Chester, Warrington, and Manchester?"—the well known tune echoes faintly back to her ears. An overpowering, blinding, deafening rush of feeling comes over her; she sits down hastily on a bench that is near at hand, in close proximity to an Irish labourer, with a blue-spotted bundle, and, careless of the contaminating contact, buries her head in her hands, and rocks to and fro in a paroxysm of despair.

It is one of those incontrovertible facts that we all know to be true, and that we all feel to be false, that every hour is of the same length; that in an hour of

Elysium there are sixty whole minutes, and that in an hour of Hades there are only sixty. In Esther's hour of waiting there are, however, seventy-five minutes, as the train is a quarter of an hour late.

"Is it a fast train?" she asks eagerly of the bearded guard, who, with the politeness inborn in guards, opens the carriage-door for her.

"No, miss," he answers, with suavity —"slow train, miss; stops at every station; 6.10 was the fast train, miss!"

Off at last, sliding slowly at first past platform, officials, trucks, book-stalls, dowdy women and dusty men; then the wind comes beating with a strong rush against Esther's cheeks, blowing back her hair, as they fly through the air at the rate of fifty miles an hour.

The transit from Brainton to Berwyn occupies three hours, and during the greater part of that time Miss Craven maintains almost exactly the same attitude; with her greedy eyes devouring every field and

tree and homestead as they run past—each village spire and bridge a finger-post to tell her that she is so much nearer her boy. She does not cry at all, or groan. Even had she wished to do so, conventionality—that makes us laugh when we would fain weep, makes us weep when we would fain laugh—would have forbidden her, for she is not alone in the carriage. Two other travellers share it with her—two extremely cheerful young men, to whom it is a matter of supreme indifference how many hedges and meadows are before, how many behind them. They are not exactly gentlemen: and indeed it is a matter of almost as curious inquiry as what becomes of all the pins that are made and lost, in what part of the train, if it be not in the guard's van, gentlemen and ladies travel, as assuredly they are but seldom to be met with in first-class carriages. The two youths have made themselves and their hat-boxes, rugs, &c., luxuriously comfortable, and seem rather

disposed to be funny—to "show off," as children say, for the benefit of the lovely girl, who looks so disconsolate and dishevelled, who seems so unflatteringly unaware of their presence. They eat sandwiches and drink sherry; they are provided with a large stock of all the morning papers, and by-and-by the eldest and boldest of them proffers *Punch*, *Fun*, and half-a-dozen other dreary comicalities to Esther. She looks at him for a second with her large wistful eyes as she declines the offered civility, and then resumes her watch. Having obtained that one short glance, he ceases from his witticisms, half-conscious of being in the company of a great sorrow—as we involuntarily hush our voices and speak softly in the presence of our great master and owner—Death. Perhaps, cowardly slaves as we are, we fear lest, if we should speak loudly, he might be reminded of our existence—might lay his heavy hand on our shoulders also.

Another hour of waiting at Berwyn—another hour before there is any train for the branch line that leads to Glan-yr-Afon—any train, at least, that stops at so insignificant a station. Another hour of tramping in forlorn, impotent impatience up and down the platform, hustled by a hurrying crowd, who know nothing, and care, if possible, less, about her and her grief. Well, if every one in England wept for every one else's sorrows, the noise of tears and sobbings would drown the whirring of all the mills in Leeds and Manchester—the booming of all the cannon at Shoeburyness. It is half an hour past noon, when, almost before the train has stopped at the little wayside station, Esther springs out. She is the only passenger for Glan-yr-Afon; and the man who unites in himself the functions of station-master and porter looks at her with a recognising eye. He must know whether Jack is alive or dead. He looks much as usual, but so he would whether Jack were alive or dead.

Feeling an overmastering sense of fear of and repugnance from the news he may have to give her, she runs to the little wicket that leads out into the road.

"Your ticket, please, miss!" cries the man, following her.

She had forgotten it; it takes a minute to extricate it from her glove; she thinks that he looks as if he were going to speak; and, in a blind terror of what he may say, turns from him and rushes down the road. Any suspense is better than some certainties.

CHAPTER VI.

The mountains stand still and drowsy in the sleepiness of midday. Through the mistiness of the air, the russet glories of the dying bracken blaze on their breasts: the oak-woods still keep their deep dusk green, but the sycamore has felt the kiss of winter, and is growing red and sere beneath it. The sun is reigning, sole despot of the sky, having banished every rebel cloud beyond the horizon's limits. It is almost always fine weather when we are most miserable. Whatever poets say to the contrary, Nature is not sympathetic: rather is she very insolent to us in her triumphant, durable beauty. She loves to say to us, "Though you are weeping, my eyes are dry: though you

are very sick and feeble, I am strong and fair: though you are most short-lived, here to-day and gone to-morrow, I am eternal, I *endure*."

In the meadow below the house, Jack's sheep are browsing—the Cheviots that he was so proud of: down the stony, steep back-road the cart-horses come jogging, to be watered at the pool at the hill-foot. With shortened breath, and straining muscles, Esther runs fleetly past them, not daring to look into the carter's face. Through the gate, by the stables, and then the familiar little old house comes in sight, with its high-pitched roof and its old-fashioned chimney-pots. White pigeons are walking about on the gravelled sweep, bowing and scraping, and making love, with a formal solemnity worthy of Sir Charles Grandison. The Virginia creeper's scarlet banners wave from the wall; the hall-window is open; on the ledge lies a tabby cat, with one eye open and the other shut; two cocks are crow-

ing in emulous rivalry in the farmyard. Everything looks peaceful, happy, *alive*. Gathering a little feeble hope from these signs, Esther collects her small remnant of breath, and runs towards the door. She has nearly reached it, when, stepping hastily out from the porch, one comes to meet her: *one*, but not *the* one: he will pass through that porch but once again, and then not of his own accord, but borne heavily on others' shoulders. Unable to frame any speech, Esther looks up mutely in Brandon's face (for it is he), and there reads her doom. "He is dead —he is dead!" she sees written wetly on either eye.

"He is better off than we are," says the young man, brokenly, taking hold of both her hands.

She sits down heavily on the bench in the porch: what hurry is there now? After all, it is but a poor shabby remnant of us that Death gets when he makes his final claim upon us; in most of us the

greater, better part has died long before. Of Esther, three-fourths died as she sat on the oak-bench in the porch that autumn morning: breath remained, and blood still circulated through veins and arteries, and speech and hearing were left; but youth, and hope, and heart, died very suddenly and utterly, to come back to life again never any more. She sits staring vacantly at the seat opposite her for several minutes, and then speaks distinctly, almost loudly: "How long ago?"

"About eight," answers Brandon, briefly and sadly, turning away his head to hide his womanish tears for the young fellow that fell asleep so gently in his arms, in the early morning, when other folks were waking.

"What was it killed him?" asks the girl, in the same hard clear voice.

Bob looks at her in astonishment: he had been steeling himself against faintings, hysterics, a terrible scene of shrieks and wailings, but this conscious stony col-

lectedness fills him with a fearful surprise.

"It was diphtheria," he answers, sorrowfully, taking her hand again and stroking it, while his hot tears fall thick upon it.

She leaves it in his, passive as the hand of a statue, unknowing, indifferent, whether he held it or not.

"Did he suffer much?" she inquires, lifting her lovely, hopeless eyes piteously to his face.

"Not at the last," answers Brandon, evasively, almost under his breath.

Silence for a few seconds: the cocks are still crowing, the pigeons courting, the cat purring on the window-sill: Nature is fond of these horrible contrasts.

Presently she speaks again: "Why was not I sent for before?" she asks, in a rough, harsh whisper.

"We telegraphed for you yesterday morning, the instant that we found there was any danger," he replies, speaking very gently, but wincing a little under the reproach implied in her question.

"And it did not reach me till this morning. If I had had it when I ought, I suppose I should have been in time to see him," she says, with apathy, looking away towards the misty hill.

"He sent you his love," says Brandon, struggling again with that same breaking in his voice. "Dear fellow! he was quite happy!"

"Was he?" she says, with the same vacant look. "I'll go to him." As she speaks, she rises and moves towards the door.

"You had better not," he says hastily, laying his hand on her arm.

"Why?" inquires she, looking at him with perfect calmness; "are you afraid of my fainting or going into hysterics? You need not be; it is only that I am not the least sorry that Jack is dead, and that I want to be."

"It is not that," he answers, earnestly; "but—but—you know, dear, that it is a terribly infectious complaint."

"Is it?" she answers, a ray of animation lighting up her haggard face. "I'm glad; perhaps God will let me catch it!"

Seeing that she is resolute, he ceases trying to dissuade her. In the small dark hall, old Luath is lying on the rug; seeing Esther enter, he raises himself quickly, and goes to meet her, with heavy tail wagging and affectionate eyes, on which age is written in blue dimness. Now that the master's sister has come home, he is sure that the master cannot be far behind. He is waiting for him, waiting to walk round the farm; he has been waiting this long time, thinking that he has gone upon a journey; and so he has. But oh! Luath, it is a journey on which man may take neither horse nor dog, neither wife, nor sister, nor friend; a journey on which some man, woman, or child is setting off every minute that beats; and whence no explorers return, with maps and charts and wondrous tales, to vaunt themselves of their exploits, and be extolled and

praised as benefactors to their race. Let us hope that it is because they find that country most pleasant that they come not again. In the drawing-room, a canary is shrilling his loud sharp song; they have thrown a shawl over his cage to keep him quiet; but through the shawl the sun pierces, and the bird's keen clear jubilation goes up to meet it. How can he sing so very gaily now Jack is dead? At the room-door they pause.

"Don't come in! I'd rather have him to myself, please," Esther says, in a steady whisper.

"Promise not to kiss him, Essie!" Brandon rejoins, very earnestly; also, in a whisper, "We cannot spare you too."

She takes no notice of his request, but, opening the door gently, enters the chamber, where the king of kings, and lord of lords, almighty Death—before whom we all grovelling do unwilling obeisance—is holding one of his myriad courts. It is but a small, slightly fur-

nished room in which he is holding this one, but that concerns him but little. His majesty is so great that he can afford to dispense with the adventitious adjuncts of pomp and circumstance. Without his crown and sceptre, without his courtiers—Plague, Pestilence, and Famine—he is still very king and emperor.

The window is open, but the white curtains drawn—

"While through the lattice ivy shadows creep."

On the table stand physic-bottles—puny foils with which we fence with death—and an open Bible, out of which Brandon, with shaking voice, and a weak dying hand held in his strong tender one, read the old comfortable words that have soothed many a transit, to the young traveller who was setting out meekly, and not fearfully, in the autumn morning. Over the bed spreads a white sheet, and beneath it a formless form!

Can that be Jack? Can that be Jack,

lying still and idle in the bright midday? —Jack, to whom the shelter of a house was ever irksome, who was up and about at cockcrow, to whom all weathers were the same, and the bracing wind blowing about the heathery hills the very breath of his nostrils? A feeling of incredulity steals over her. She walks to the bed and turns down the sheet from the face, and the incredulity deepens into incredulous awe. Oh, ye liars! all ye that say that sleep and death are alike! what kinship is there between the pliant relaxer of soft limbs, the light brief slumber, that, at any trivial noise, a trumpeting gnat or distant calling voice, flies and is dissolved, and the grave stiff whiteness of that profoundest rest that no thousand booming cannons, no rock-rending earthquake, no earth-riving thunderbolt, can break? It is an insult to that strong narcotic to liken any other repose to that he gives. They have crossed the young fellow's hands upon his unheaving breast, meekly, as the hands

of one that prayeth; and laid sprigs of grey-flowered rosemary in them. She looks at him steadfastly, a great awful amazement in her dilated eyes. Is *this* the boy that whistled "I paddle my own canoe"—whose step, glad and noisy, echoed about the stairs?—the boy that sat and smoked at the study-window, with her fond head resting on his young slight shoulder?—the boy that was worried about failing crops and barren land?—the boy whose laugh had a sincerer ring in it than any one else's, who made so many jokes, and had such a light heart? Can *this* be he—this white, awful, beautiful statue? Was ever crowned king, in purple and minever, half so majestical as he, as he lies on his narrow bed in the scant poor room, with that serene stern smile that only dead mouths wear on his solemn changed face?—that smile that seems to say, "I have overcome! I *know!*"

Esther's love for Jack is great as love can be—greater than Jonathan's for David,

greater than David's for Absalom; and this pale prone figure is unearthly fair and grand; but can she connect the two ideas? What have they to say to one another? Can she realize that if this form be not her brother, neither will she find him again on the earth's face, though she seek him carefully with tears. For one instant it comes home to her; for one instant light darts into her soul—light keen and cruel as the forked lightning flash that, on some mirk night, glares blinding bright into a dark room, illumining every object as with the furnace-fires of hell! She sinks on her trembling knees by the bedside, and says, with dumb heart-wrung entreaty—

"God! God! give him back to me, or let me go where he is!"

But the great Lord that said once, "Lazarus, come forth!" has said "Come forth!" to never another since him. "Lie thou still, till I call thee!" He says; and none durst move hand or foot. But since he cannot come to her, why should

not she go to him? Has the disease that slew him spent all its force on that one slight frame? Is not there enough of it left to kill her too? It was Juliet's thought when she spake reproachingly to her dead Romeo, as she looked into the empty poison-cup—

> "Oh, churl! drink all and leave no friendly drop,
> To help me after——."

Suddenly Brandon's beseeching words recur to her: "Promise not to kiss him, Essie!" If she kiss him, he may give her the boon of death. Instantly she rises, and stooping over him, lays her tremulous warm lips on his still cheek. The unearthly awful cold of the contact between the dead and the living strikes a chilly shrinking along her veins and limbs; but not for that shrinking does she desist. Again and again she kisses him, driven on by that strong drear hope, saying moaningly, "My boy! my boy!—give it me! give it me!" Then unbelief

comes back. This is not Jack: he is somewhere else. She will find him by-and-by. This is very terrible, this present experience, but she catches herself thinking she will tell Jack all about it when she sees him. To the incredulity succeeds a stupid apathy. She sinks down upon her knees again, with her elbows resting on the counterpane, and fixes her stony eyes upon the dead stripling; watches him; looks at him steadfastly, without intermission; looks at "the shell of a flown bird," as the old philosopher very grandly said. She does not know how long she means to stay there: she does not know how long she has already staid there; when some one entering, lays his hand upon her shoulder, and says, with kindly gravity, "Come away, dear!"

"I am doing no harm!" she answers dully, not moving her eyes.

"Come, darling!" he says, not attempting to reason with her, but speaking in

the coaxing tone one would use to a fractious sickly child.

She answers neither "Ay" nor "Nay;" she neither resists nor consents, and so, half carrying, half leading, he takes her from the room, and they leave poor Jack lying all alone in his shroud, smiling sternly sweet.

CHAPTER VII.

So the blinds are drawn down; a sort of notice that people put in their windows, saying, "Do not look in, or you will see Death!" And the few neighbours round drive up and inquire how Miss Craven is, and are informed that she is pretty well. And the servants each do the other's work; and there is a general interesting *bouleversement* in the household, and much chattering and crying and a stream of visitors in the kitchen. And Brandon goes hither and thither, taking upon himself all the drear work of arranging Jack's final departure from his home among the mountains, and keeping at bay his mother and sisters, who, armed with bibles, hymnals, and "Reflections for

a Mourner," are prepared to sally forth in proselytising ardour upon the conquest of Esther's soul. And Esther herself is, for the time, soulless as the fair marble mask in the quiet room upstairs.

> "His lips are very mild and meek;
> Though one should smite him on the cheek,
> Or on the mouth, he will not speak."

If any one were to smite her on lip or cheek, neither would she resent it or complain: she sits in an armchair, in the drawing-room, with her hands folded in her lap, and the servants bring her tea every half-hour (incessant tea being supposed to be the necessary accompaniment of great grief), and request her to "keep up." So she sits in the armchair all day long—trying to be sorry, trying to weep. She has had Sarah in, and has made her tell her all the particulars of her brother's last hours; has listened attentively while the woman—the easy tears streaming down her cheeks—relates how

"Mr. Brandon was with poor master all along, from the very first, and if he had been his own born brother, he could not have been kinder;" and how he lifted him up in his arms, and laid his head on his shoulder—"Master could breathe easier so, poor dear young gentleman!—and *he* (master) had been so pleasant-spoken to the last, and had said, said he, 'God bless you, old fellow! I'd have done as much for you, if I had had the chance;' and how, about seven o'clock, he had asked what o'clock it was—we all knew what that meant—and had then seemed to fall asleep in Mr. Brandon's arms, and just as the clock struck eight, he gave a sigh—like that—and a sort of pleasant bit of a smile, and was gone all in a minute!" It is very touching, but it does not touch Esther. She rises and walks into the hall, and looks at his greatcoat and his hat, and kisses his gloves, that seem to retain somewhat of the shape of the kind hands that once filled them. She

thinks resolutely of how he has been her one friend throughout life; thinks of the presents he gave her, and of how seldom he went to any town, without bringing her some little remembrance back from it; thinks of that last five-pound note, so hardly spared, and yet so very gladly given; thinks of how poor he was, how slight, how young. But it is all no good; it seems to her like some pathetic tale about a stranger that she is telling herself. And the days pass, and she grows weak from inanition, but refuses all food. If she can be unnatural, horrible enough to feel hunger or thirst now Jack is dead, at all events she will not indulge her low nature; and so she eats not, and her pulse grows feeble.

"And all the wheels of being slow?"

So it comes to pass that she falls sick and is carried up to bed, and lies there half in sleep, half in insensibility. And the mornings and the evenings go by, and Jack's

burial-day comes. They had hoped that it would have passed without her knowing, but it was not so. Now that he is leaving his home for this last time, he does not go light-springing down the stairs, as at other times, but with much tramping of strange feet, with purposed muffling of strange voices. How can she fail to hear,

"The steps of the bearers heavy and slow?"

Through all her trance it breaks; from her little latticed window, with her sick limbs trembling beneath her, and her miserable eyes nailed to the gaoler coffin, in whose strait custody her dead lies prisoned, she sees the drooped pall and the black-scarfed mourners. These mourners are but few, for Jack—though now awfuller than any absolutest monarch—was, in life, poor and of little consequence: the gap made by the extinction of that one young life is but narrow. Standing there, she feels a pang of bitter regret and anguish that there are not more

people to be sorry for Jack. And so, being weak, the fountains of her soul are broken up within her, and she falls to weeping mightily; and, but for that weeping, she would, perchance, have died, some say; but I think not — for why should grief, being our natural element, kill us any more than water the fish, or air the bird?

CHAPTER VIII.

THUS the grave yawns for another victim, and having swallowed him, and a million more that same day, returns to its former state of insatiable famished greed. It is a law—natural, wise, and comprehensible by the feeblest understanding—that all created beings, in which there is progressive life, must come forth, ripen, decay, and fall. But why, oh! why, in too many cases does the decay and fall forerun the ripening? Why is so many a worm permitted to gnaw out so many a closed bud's green heart? Why is the canker death allowed to pasture on so many an unblown life? Why are so many little toddling children, not yet come into the heritage of reason to which we are

all by our human birth entitled, borne from their mother's emptied arms to their small short graves? Is it, as Hartley Coleridge very nobly, whether truly or untruly, said—

"God only made them for his Christ to save?"

Very wasteful is the mighty mother, knowing that her materials are inexhaustible. And so they lay Jack down in the wormy grave.

"Bear, bear him along,
With his few faults shut up like dead flow'rets."

No one will ever abuse him or say anything ill-natured of him again; for to speak evil of the helpless, speechless, answerless dead, requires a heart as bad, a nature as cowardly vile, as his must be that foully murders a young child. And the mourners go home, and take off their hatbands and scarves, and give them to their wives to make aprons of. And old Luath lies in the hall, watching still, with

ears attentively pricked at any incoming footstep, and hope drooping, as day droops too, begins to howl dismally towards sundown.

And Esther—"You ought not to grieve for him; it is a happy change for him; he is in Heaven!" So they had said to her weepingly, as people do say to us, when the desire of our eyes has left us; but even as they spake them, she felt that they were but words, hollow and empty as the greetings in the market-place with which we salute our indifferent acquaintance. Was she so sure that the change had been a happy one? It was a change from the known to the unknown, from moderate certain evils, and moderate probable good, to infinite possibilities of horror or blessedness. Where lay this heaven, this promised land, where we so confidently lodge our dead? Was it up above that highest bluest arch that looks in truth pure enough, and solid enough, to be the floor of some sweet elysium?

Ah! no! Human knowledge, that like a naughty, prying child, has found out at once so infinitely too much and too little, tells us that that skyey vault is but thin air. She thinks, shuddering—"What if heaven itself be but thin air? *Is it anywhere?* What if its existence at all be but the fine-spun fancy of poor human hearts, that must needs frame for themselves some blessed definite hope, since *real* hope have they none? Is it a beautiful tender fraud practised by themselves upon themselves, to save them from the despair of the black vagueness into which they must send out their departed ones, and go out themselves when life's little day is over? Oh, light! light! When the great God said, 'Let there be light!' in the material world, why did not He say so too in the world of spirits? I know that my soul shall live for ever! I know that there is that within me over which the most insatiable of monsters, insatiabler than any slain in classic tale—a monster

that turns beauty to unsightliness, whose handmaid is corruption, and whose drink is tears—has no power. But alas! alas! can I rejoice in my immortality, when I know not where, or under what conditions, those endless, endless æons will roll themselves away into the past?"

* * * *

"We must bow beneath the rod," says old Mrs. Brandon, nodding her head and her poke bonnet. It is the identical poke bonnet, and not another, in which she once paid her congratulatory visit. The summer sun has browned it a little, but otherwise it is in a state of high efficiency. "We must bow beneath the rod, knowing that it is a *tender Father's* hand that wields it."

"I suppose so," answers Esther, listlessly. To her it seems a matter of indifference whose hand it was that inflicted such an immedicable hurt, seeing that it has been inflicted by some one, and now

yawns, a gaping rift in her soul, never to be assuaged by any balsam.

"Suppose!" cries Miss Bessy, her long uncertain nose reddening a little, in her righteous zeal, at the slackness of Esther's faith. "Surely, surely, if we are *Believers*, there can be no '*suppose*' in such a case."

"I did not mean to express any doubt," Esther says, gently, but wearily.

"*Suppose* will not do us much good at the *Last Day*," continues Miss Bessy, rather venomously. "Unless we can lay fast hold upon Jesus" *(laying hold of a roll of paper to exemplify the tenacity of her own grasp*)*, "unless we have assurance that we are *Elect*, where are we?"

"If it is any comfort to you, love, you know that you have our prayers," says Mrs. Brandon, squeezing Esther's hand.

"We have set apart a special day with several Christian friends," says Bessy, with animation, "to wrestle in prayer for you, that this searching dispensation

* A fact.

may be blessed to your conversion—that you may find the Lord."

"Thanks," answers Esther, meekly, too broken-down to resent even the indignity of being set up on a metaphorical stool of repentance, amid a select circle of Miss Bessy's Christian friends.

"If we could send you anything from Plas Berwyn——" begins Mrs. Brandon.

"Any books or leaflets," interrupts Bessy.

"Any eatables, or anything of that kind," amends her mother. "I daresay you have not been thinking much about housekeeping lately, my poor child; and you know, whenever you feel inclined to come to us *for good*, you will always find open hearts and open arms," concludes the good old woman, suiting her action to her words, and folding Esther in a black bombazine embrace.

"Thank you very much," replies the girl, gratefully, her low sad voice almost smothered by her mamma-in-law's bonnet-

strings, amongst which her little disconsolate head is lying *perdue*.

"*We* are only broken cisterns, you should remember, mamma," says Bessy, a little reprovingly of her parent's carnal materialism; "leaky vessels, all of us! You should direct Esther to the one *Ebenezer*."

The race of Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite, is by no means extinct: if not in the male line, at all events in the female, it still survives in the person of many a Miss Bessy Brandon.

Brandon has been busy all day with Jack's lawyer: returning in the afternoon, he finds Esther sitting on the study-window ledge, on which she and Jack used to sit on summer nights, and watch the little feathery, plumy clouds sail along the sky's sapphire sea; used to watch

"The large white stars rise one by one,"

and speculate who lived in them, and what they were made of. Jack has entered into the ranks of the initiated, but she still sits and wonders.

"Come out for a stroll, Essie," says the young man, stooping over her till his yellow beard, curly as a bull's forehead, almost touches her dark drooped head.

"If you like," she answers, indifferently; and so drags herself slowly up, and walks away heavily to get ready.

"Where shall we go?" inquires he, as they stand at the farmyard gate. The callow Cochin chickens have grown up, and are stalking about, in all the dignity of long yellow legs and adolescence, under the frames of the corn-ricks. "Where shall we go?—to see my mother?"

"That would be returning her visit almost too promptly," answers the young girl, with a weary smile; "it is not more than half an hour since they left this house."

"*They!* Were my sisters here too,

then?" inquires Bob, quickly; his confidence in his sisters' infallibility as to words and actions not being so perfect as in his mamma's. "I hope their coming did not worry you much."

"Nothing worries me now," she answers, calmly; "I defy anything to worry, or anger, or frighten me. Do you remember a line of Mrs. Barrett Browning's? Oh no; by-the-by, you never read poetry—

'Fallen too low for special fear.'

That is exactly my case."

"I never know the right sort of thing to say, don't you know," remarks Brandon, rather awkwardly, looking down, and poking about little pebbles with the end of his stick. "But I had hoped that mother might have hit upon something that would have comforted you a little."

"She meant to, I am sure," replies Esther, gravely. "She was very kind, and so were the girls, I suppose; only

some of Bessy's speeches rather reminded me of Eliphaz the Temanite's 'Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?' "

"I wish to Heaven that Bessy could be possessed with a dumb devil!" says that young lady's brother, looking up, red with sudden anger. "No one should ever have my leave to try and cast it out."

"Let us go to the common," Esther says, abruptly, not heeding him.

CHAPTER IX.

The common stretches, long and stony, at the top of the hill that backs Glan-yr-Afon. To reach it they have to climb through the waving woods, where the beeches and sycamores emulously cast down their crimson and amber leaves to strew the path before their feet. To reach it, they have to pass the woodman's stone cottage, his pigstye, and his little yap-yapping rude dog. From the common you may look upwards or downwards—northwards, to the valley-head; southwards, to the sea.

From among the scant brown mountain-grass, the limestone crops frequent, in peaks, and slabs, and riven rock-fragments. Far down in chinks and crevices little

black-stemmed ferns grow darkling, and over the rock's rough face, the lichens, drab and yellow, make their little plans and charts. One may fancy some former people of strong giants sleeping very sweetly beneath those unchiselled tombstones, with their epitaphs written out fairly in Nature's hand, in green mosses and rain-furrows. In spring the hill's harsh front is crowned with a yellow splendour of gorse-flowers, but now a single blossom blows here and there desolate, just to hinder the old saying from being quite a lie. Below, in the valley, the mists roll greyly; and out above them Naullan church spire rises, pointing heavenwards, as if showing the way to the dead flock gathered round its feet; points heavenwards, like the finger of some sculptured saint.

The autumn winds are piping bleakly, singing an ugly peevish dirge for the gone summer, bending the frost-seared brake-fern all one way, and with rough hands

pushing back Robert and Esther, saying, "This is *our* territory; what brings you here?"

Esther shivers.

"You are cold, I'm afraid," says Brandon, anxiously, putting his head on one side, not out of sentimentality, but in the endeavour to keep his hat on.

"Yes," she answers, rapidly; "and I'm glad of it. I should *hate* to feel warm and comfortable; I want to be cold, and faint, and miserable *always*. Do you know," she continues, excitedly, laying her hand on his arm, "yesterday I *laughed?*—yes! I actually *laughed!* and it is only a fortnight 'since—wasn't it horrible of me?' I want the days and the weeks to go by quickly: I want it to be a long time since Jack died!"

Brandon makes no answer—partly because he is utterly at a loss for a reply, partly because he is still wrestling with his hat. Presently they come to a disused quarry, where the quarrymen have hewn

out rock-ledges into comfortable seats for them. The wind howls above them, angry and sad, and flings hither and thither the flowerless broom-spikes that look over the cliffs, but it cannot reach them.

"Esther," says Bob, taking up a sharp stone, and beginning to draw white lines on the rock's smooth surface, "it seems as if I had no other occupation nowadays than to say disagreeable things to you, but I cannot help it: do you think you can bear to leave Glan-yr-Afon in three weeks or so?"

"Bear!" she repeats, bitterly; "I can bear anything—I have proved that already, I think. Any one that had had any feeling would have died of *this;* but I—I sleep and eat as well as ever: I am like the baker who refused Christ the loaf—I *cannot* die!"

"Hush!" he says, eagerly; "don't want to go before your time, or perhaps the Almighty might take you at your word."

There is silence for a moment or two, then Brandon speaks again: "At the end of three weeks you will come to us, then?"

No answer.

Thinking that the wind has carried away his words, he repeats his question: "At the end of three weeks you will come to us, then?"

She turns her head round slowly. "Could not I live in some hovel by myself?"

He shakes his head. "Impossible! You see," he says, speaking with slow reluctance, "he—poor dear fellow!—laid out a great deal of money on all the latest improvements in farming implements, and things of that kind, and they did not bring him anything back; they would have done, no doubt, if he had been given time," he adds, quickly, afraid of seeming to cast the faintest slur upon the dead boy.

"You mean to say that I have no money—that I am a beggar," she says, fixing her clear, steadfast eyes upon him:

and in them is none of that dismay that her words seem to imply.

"I mean to say," he answers, heartily, "that henceforth you are to be one of us, and that we are very, *very* glad of it."

She does not say "Thank you;" she neither assents nor refuses; she only looks away, and watches the distant trees tossing violent arms, in riotous fight with the wind.

Something in her manner makes Brandon uneasy. "It is agreed, then?" he asks, eagerly.

No reply.

"Why don't you answer me, Esther?" (with a slight natural impatience in his tone).

She turns her face slowly round towards him—a face paled by her late agonies, thinned by long fastings, and by thousands of great tears. "Because," she replies, "I have one friend in the world now; and when I have answered you, I shall have none!"

"What *do* you mean?"

"If I were to come to you, I should come as your supposed future wife, shouldn't I? Well! I should be an impostor."

A great sickening fear whitens his brown face, but he contains himself, and speaks quietly: "Do you think I meant to *bargain* with you? Do you think I meant to make a profit for myself out of your troubles? What have I ever done to make you think me so mean?" he asks, reproachfully.

She draws a heavy sighing breath. "Why am I beating about the bush?" she says, chiding herself; "it must out, sooner or later! Oh, Bob! Bob! if I had it in me to be sorry about anything, I should be sorry about this!"

"About what?" he asks, cruelly excited. "Look this way, Esther. Is it—is it what I have been afraid of all along?"

Her head sinks in shamed dejection on her breast. "Yes, it is," she answers, faintly.

There will be a great storm at sea to-night; the gulls are circling about, calling wildly to one another—here, twenty miles inland.

"Who is it?" asks Bob, in a husky whisper, presently.

She sighs again, profoundly. "Do you remember," she says, "before I went to the Gerards'—how many hundred years ago was that?—your saying one day that you wished they had not got a son, and my laughing at you about it? Well! you were right!—it is he!"

Brandon turns away his head, speaks not, nor gives any sign. It is in silence that a good brave man meetliest takes his deathblow.

"I don't think he would have cared much about me, if I had let him alone," says Esther, taking a sort of gloomy pleasure in painting herself as black as possible.

There is a pause—a pause, during which Brandon is fighting one of those duels in which most men have to engage at least

once in their lives—the duel with a mortal agony, that says, tauntingly, "I am your master! I have conquered you!" to which one that is valiant makes answer, "You are strong, you are terrible; but you are *not* my master. I will keep you under!"

"You will go to him then, of course, instead of coming to us?" he says, presently, speaking in some one else's voice (for it certainly is not his own), and keeping his head turned away; for no one is willing to parade their death-pangs before others' eyes.

She laughs derisively. "Go to him! Hardly! I should get but an indifferent welcome if I did. You know I never told him a word about you—ladylike and honourable of me, wasn't it?—but some one else did him that good office; and now, if he were to see me falling over the edge of that cliff, he would not put out a finger to save me. That is his sort of love!" She ends, bitterly, "And I think he is right."

Another longer silence. Brandon is

wrestling with that adversary of his, that deadly anger and pain; that riotous, tigerish jealousy, that makes us all murderers for the time, in thought at least; that mad, wild longing—madder, wilder than any love ardour, than any paroxysm of religious zeal—to have his hands, for one moment of strong ecstasy, about the throat of the rich man that has robbed him of his one ewe lamb. The sweat of that combat stands cold upon his brow, but he overcomes. After awhile he speaks gently, as one would speak to a little sick child: "Were you very fond of him Esther?"

"I suppose so," she answers, with reflective calmness, looking straight before her. "I must have been, or I should not have said and done the mean things I did. I should not have degraded myself into begging him to take me back again, when I might as well have begged of this rock" (thrusting her soft hand against it) "to turn to grass and flowers. He told me that he would never forgive me, either in

this world or the next! I thought it very dreadful at the time, but I don't much care now whether he forgives me or not."

"Have you forgotten him so completely already?" asks Bob, forgetting his own misery for the moment, in sheer blank amazement.

"Forgotten him!" she repeats, thoughtfully. "No, not that! not that! I might as well try to forget myself. I remember every line of his face, his voice, and his ways, and every word he said almost; but if I were to see him standing close to us here, I should not feel the slightest inclination to go to him, or to call him to come to me. I feel all dead everywhere." They remain in the same attitude for several minutes, neither of them stirring nor uttering a word. Then Esther speaks, with a certain uneasy abruptness. "Well!" she says, "I am waiting!—waiting for you to call me a murderess and a bad woman, and all the other names that St. John gave me, on much less provocation.

Make haste!" she says, with a nervous, forced laugh; "I am in a hurry to hear that I have succeeded in getting rid of my last friend. Quick! quick!—tell me that you hate me, and have done with it!"

"*Hate* you!" he repeats, tenderly; his brave voice trembling a little in spite of himself, and the meekness of a great heroism ennobling his face. "You, poor soul! Why should I hate you because another man is better and more loveable than I, and because you have eyes to see it?"

The eyes he speaks of turn upon him, wide and startled, in astonished disbelief of his great generosity.

"You don't understand!" she says, quickly. "You don't take it in. I was *engaged* to him; I was going to marry him, and all the time I never once mentioned your name to him, of my own accord; and when he asked me about you, I said you were only a common acquaintance. You

must hate me!" she ends, vehemently! "don't pretend that you don't!"

"Hush!" he answers sorrowfully, but very gently, "that is nonsense! I don't even hate him; at least" (pausing a moment, to thrust down and trample under foot one more spasm of that intolerable burning jealousy)—"at least, I try not. It was my own fault. I knew all along that I was poor, and stupid, and awkward, that I had nothing but sheer love to give you, and I hoped against hope that that might win you at last. We all set our affections upon some one thing, I suppose," he says, with a patient, pitiful smile, "and I daresay it is all the better for us in the end that we don't often get it; but oh, love! love! you might have told me!" Then his resolution breaks a little, and, covering his face with his hands, he groans aloud, in a man's dry-eyed agony—how much awfuller to see than a woman's facile tears, that flow indifferently for a dead pet dog, or a dead husband!

Esther sits looking at him during several minutes, awestruck, as a child that has made a grown-up person cry; then one of those quick impulses that carry some women away seizes her.

"Bob!" she says, putting her sweet mouth close to his ear, while her gentle vibrating voice thrills down to his stricken soul, "I have been very bad to you, but I will make up for it!"

"Will you?" he says, looking up with a mournful, sceptical smile; "how?"

"I'll marry you, if you'll have me, and make a very good wife to you," she says simply, with unblushing calmness, eyelids unlowered, and voice unwavering.

"Child!" he cries, "you are very generous, but do you think I cannot be generous too?"

"It is not generosity," she says, eagerly; "I *wish* to marry you!"

He shakes his head sadly. "You don't know what you are saying," he answers, taking her little hand between both his—

holding it almost fatherly, in a tender prison. "You don't know what marriage is. You don't understand that a union so close with a person you don't love would be infinitely worse than being tied to a dead body; the one could not last very long, the other might for years."

She looks at him silently, with her grave innocent eyes, for an instant or two while she tries to go down to the depth of her own heart—tries to feel something besides that numb vague indifference to everything. "If I don't love you," she says, doubtfully, "I love nobody; I like you better than anyone else in the world! Didn't Jack die in your arms?" she says, breaking out into sudden and violent tears "Wasn't his head resting on your shoulder when he went away? Oh dear, dear shoulder!" she cries, kissing it passionately. "How can I help loving you for that?"

At the touch of her soft mouth, that has been to him hitherto, despite his nominal betrothal, a sealed book, his steadfast

heart begins to pulse frantically fast: if a river of flame instead of blood were poured through his veins, they could not have throbbed with an insaner heat: his sober head swims as one that is dizzy with strong drink; reels in the overpowering passion of a man that has not frittered away his heart in little bits, after our nineteenth-century fashion, but has cast it down, *whole*, unscarred by any other smallest wound, at one woman's feet. Oh, if he might but take her at her word! Or, if there must be no marriage between them, why may not there be a brief sweet marriage of the lips? It would do her no harm—since kisses, happily for the reputation of ninety-nine hundredths of the female world, leave no mark—and it would set him for an instant on a pinnacle of bliss that would equal him with the high gods.

But the paroxysm is short. Before she who has caused it has guessed at its existence, it is put down, held down strongly.

Women are very often like naughty children, putting a lighted match to a train of gunpowder, and then surprised and frightened because there is an explosion.

"You are deceiving yourself," he says, speaking almost coldly. "You think you like me, because I happened to be the last person that was with the dear fellow that's gone — because you knew that I was grieved about him too: but think of me as you thought of me when you were at the Gerards', and you'll know how much you love me for myself."

"Love!" she repeats, dreamily — "love! love!" saying over and over again the familiar common word, until by very dint of frequent repetition it grows unfamiliar, odd, void of meaning. "I have used up all I ever had of that: perhaps I never had much, but I think you the very best man that ever lived. Is not that enough to go upon?"

He shakes his head with a slight smile. "Worse and worse! that *would* be a diffi-

cult character to live up to. No!" he says, looking at her, with the nobility of an utter self-abnegation in his sorrowful blue eyes. "I will *never* marry you, Essie! never!—I swear it! If you were to go down on your knees to me, I would not: I should deserve that God should strike me dead if I could be guilty of such unmanly selfishness!".

"You refuse me then?" she says, with a sigh of half-unconscious relief. "Was ever such a thing heard of? And I have not even the satisfaction of being able to be angry with you."

"I refuse you!" he answers, steadily, taking her two little hands in his. "But —look at me, dear, and believe me—as I said to you before, so I say now, I shall love you to-day, and to-morrow, and always!"

The two young people sit silent; each looking down, as it were with inner eyes, on the wreck of their own destiny—wrecked already! though their ships have

so lately left the port. The vapours still curl about the dun hills: the clouds stoop low, as if to mingle with their sister mists. With many a sigh, and with many a shiver, the trees shower down the ruddy rain of their leaves: earth is stripping her fair body for the winter sleep. Then Brandon speaks:

"Promise me one thing, Essie!"

"*Anything* almost!"

"That this—this—*talk* we have had shall make no difference as to your coming to us!"

"What!" she cries, suddenly springing to her feet, tears of remorse and mortification rushing to her eyes. "After having done you the worst injury a woman can do a man, am I to be indebted to you for daily bread—for food, and clothes, and firing? How much lower do you wish me to fall? Have you *no* pity on me?"

"You are misstating the case," he says, quietly, his downcast eyes fixed on a little

fern that, with his stick, he is updigging from its strait home between two neighbour rocks: "you will be indebted to *me* for nothing; I shall not even be there; I shall have gone back to Bermuda."

"Gone!" she repeats, blankly. "Are *you* going too? Is everybody going away from me? And do you think," she continues, passionately, "that it will be easier for me to lie under such an obligation to your mother and sisters than to you? Is not it always harder to say 'Thank you!' to a woman than to a man? And would not I immeasurably rather sell matches, or hot potatoes at the street-corners, than do either?"

He smiles slightly; yet very ruefully withal. "My darling!" he says, looking wistfully at her noble head and delicate, thoroughbred face, "you are a great deal too pretty to sell hot potatoes, or matches either; bread-winners should not have faces like yours!"

"That is bad reasoning," she answers,

trying to laugh; "if I am pretty, people will be more likely to buy my wares. Oh Heavens!" she cries, throwing up her eyes to the dark wrack driving overhead, "what business have people to bring children into the world only to starve, or to sponge upon others? There ought to be an Act of Parliament against it! Oh, why—why is not one allowed to have a look into life before one is born—to have one's choice whether one will come into it at all or no? But, if one had, who *would* come?—who would?"

"I would," answers Bob, stoutly. "I don't think the world is half a bad place, though it is the fashion to abuse it now-a-days, and though it does do one some curiously dirty turns now and then. But after all," he adds, very gravely, "bad or good, no one can accuse it of lasting long, and there's a better at the other end of it."

"Or a worse," says Esther, gloomily. "Who knows? One cannot fancy the world without one, can one?" she con-

tinues, following out her own ideas. "One knows that, not long ago, there *was*, and not long hence there *will be*, no *I;* but one cannot realize it!"

"Why should one bother one's head trying?" says Bob, with philosophy.

"The leaves seem to come out in the spring," she continues, musingly, without heeding him; "the winds to blow, and the birds to sing, all with some reference to *oneself:* one cannot understand their all going on when oneself has stopped!"

Reflections of this character are not much in Bob's way. Pensive musings upon the caducity of the human race are, generally, rather feminine than masculine. A woman dreams over the shortness of life, while a man crowds it with doings that make it, in effect, long. Brandon turns the conversation back into a more practical channel.

"Have you any friends that you have known longer than you have us, Essie?"

"None."

"Any to whom it would be less irksome to you to lie under an obligation, as you call it?"

"None."

"Any that you like better, in short?"

"None," she answers, with a little impatience, as if, in a way, ashamed of her own destitution. "Good or bad, I have *no* friends, *none*, and you know it."

He looks at her with a sort of shocked amazement. "Good God! what is to become of you, then?" he asks, bluntly.

"I don't know."

"How are you to live?"

"I don't know."

"Have you never once thought about it?"

"Never. I thought that we," she says, her lips beginning to quiver piteously, and her faithful thoughts, that never wander far from it, straying back to the new bare grave, where one half of that "*we*" lies sleeping—"I thought that we should have lived to be old together: most people live to be old!"

A great yearning pity—purer, nobler, with less of the satyr and more of the god in it, than in any access of human passion between man and woman—seizes him as he looks at her, sitting there so forlorn, with one thin hand lifted to shield her weary purple-lidded eyes, that have grown dim with weeping for "her boy."

"Poor little soul!" he says, compassionately; and he takes, with brotherly intimacy, the other hand, that lies listless in her lap, and lays fond lips upon it.

When one is on the verge of a burst of crying, a harsh word may avert the catastrophe, but a kind one inevitably precipitates it. With how unjust, unreasonable a hatred does one often regard the person who ill-advisedly speaks that kind word! As for Esther, she buries her face on his shoulder and begins to sob hysterically. Her hat falls off, and her bare defenceless head leans on his breast, while the autumn wind wafts one long lock of her scented hair against his face. She has forgotten

that he *was* her lover, has forgotten that he is a man: she remembers only that he is a friend, which is a sexless thing—that he is the one being that cares about her, in all the great, full, crowded world. Despite the utter abandonment of her attitude, despite the clinging closeness of her soft supple form to his, he feels none of the painful stings of passion, that so lately beset him. They are tamed, for the moment, by a nobler emotion: they dare as little assail him now, as they dare assail the holy saints in Paradise. With any other man, such abandonment might have been dangerous: with him she is safe. He lays his kind broad hand on her ruffled head, and strokes it, just as Jack used to do, in the pleasant days before he went.

"Come to us, Essie!" he says, with persuasive tenderness; "we'll be good to you: we won't plague you; you would have come to us as my wife, why won't you come as my sister?"

"Because I like buying things better than being given them!" she answers, vehemently, though still incoherent from her tears. "If I had come as your wife, I should have given you something in exchange — *myself*, body and soul, my whole life. It would have been of no value *really*, but you would have thought it something; as your sister, I shall give you absolutely nothing!"

"Child! child! why are you so proud?" he asks, with mournful reproachfulness. "Why are you so bent on standing alone? Which of us *can* stand alone in this world? We all have to lean upon one another, more or less, and the strongest of us upon God!"

"Yes, I know that!—I know that!" she answers, hastily; "but I would far rather beg, and have to be obliged to any common stranger that I had never seen before, and that most probably I should never see again, than to you. With them I should, at all events, start fair: I should

have no old debts to weigh me down; but to you I owe so much already, that I am racking my brain to think how I can pay some part of it, instead of contracting new ones."

"You would contract no new ones," he rejoins, earnestly; "on the contrary. Essie, you told me just now that you would be very glad to be able to make up to me for any pain you may have made me suffer: *now* is your time!—*now* is your opportunity!"

"How?" she sobs, lifting up her head, and speaking with a slow plaintive intonation. "You will be at the other side of the world, thousands of miles away! How will it affect *you?*"

"I *shall* be at the other side of the world," he answers, steadily; "better that I should be so! better so! But do you think that my being so far away will make it pleasanter for me to think of the one creature I love above all others on the face of the earth, starving, or worse than starving, at home?"

"Worse than starving!" she repeats, opening her great wide eyes in astonishment. "What *can* be worse than starving? Oh! I see what you mean" (a light breaking in upon her, and the colour flushing faintly into her face). "You think I should go to the bad—do something disgraceful, if I had nobody to look after me: I am sorry that you have such a bad opinion of me, but I don't wonder at it," she ends, with resigned depression.

"I have no bad opinion of you!" he answers, eagerly; "but I know the end that women, originally as pure and good as you, have come to before now. I know how hard it is for a beautiful poor girl to live *honestly* in this world, how frightfully easy to live *dis*honestly!"

"Well!" she says, recklessly; "and if I did live dishonestly, what matter? Whom have I got to be ashamed of? Whom have I got to disgrace?"

Brandon looks inexpressibly shocked. "Hush!" he says, putting his hand before

her mouth; "you don't know what you are saying! For Heaven's sake, talk in that strain to no one but me! Any one that knew you less well than I do might misunderstand you."

She looks up at him, half-frightened. "One does say dreadful things without intending it," she says, apologetically; "but I only meant to express, as forcibly as possible, how little consequence it was what happened to me."

"For God's sake, word it differently then!" he says, almost sternly; "or, better still, don't say it or think it at all! It is morbid, and it is not true. If it is of no consequence to any one else what becomes of you, it is of intense, unspeakable consequence to me: how many times must I tell you that before you mean to believe it?"

"To *you!* in *Bermuda?*" she says, with a little doubting sigh.

"Yes, to *me*, in *Bermuda*," he answers, firmly. "Perhaps you think that it was

only because I looked upon you as my own, my *property*, that I took so great an interest in you: it was not as *mine*, it was as *yourself*, that I cared about you. You are *yourself* still, though you are not nor ever will be mine."

Then, like Guinevere's, "his voice brake suddenly."

> "Then, as a stream, that spouting from a cliff
> Fails in mid-air, but gathering at the base,
> Remakes itself and flashes down the vale,
> Went on in passionate utterance."

"Essie! they say that women are more capable of self-sacrifice than men. Prove it to me now! Sacrifice this pride of yours; consent to the one thing that would make me leave England with almost a light, instead of *such* a heavy heart!"

She is silent for a minute or two, halting between two opinions; hesitating, struggling with herself: then she speaks, rapidly, but not easily—

"I cannot, Bob—I cannot! Ask me anything, not quite so hard, and I'll do

it! Just think how young I am, seventeen last birthday! I have probably forty or fifty more years to live; do you wish me to promise to be a pensioner for *half a century* on your mother's charity?"

He does not answer.

"Don't be angry with me for having a little self-respect!" she cries, passionately, snatching his hand. "I will go and stay with your people till I have found something to do, if they will have me. I will get your mother to help me in looking for work; I will take her advice in *everything*, do whatever she tells me; I will do anything—anything in life to please you, except——"

"Except the one thing I wish," he answers, sadly and coldly.

"If you speak in that tone, I shall have to promise you *anything*," she says, despairingly; "but it will only be perjury, for I shall infallibly break my promise again. Why should not I work?" she goes on, in a sort of indignation at his

silence. "Am I a cripple, or an idiot? Let me wait till I am either one or the other, before I *come upon the parish!*" she says, with the bitter pride of poverty; "at all events, let us call things by their right names."

"As you will," he answers, deeply wounded. "If you take it as a great indignity to be offered a home with the oldest friends you have in the world, of course I can say no more; but oh, child! you are wrong—you are wrong!"

CHAPTER X.

It is Sunday evening. Miss Craven has been to church for the first time since her *bereavement*, as people call it. She has displayed her crape in all its crisp funeral newness before the eyes of the Plas Berwyn congregation. Also, she has been made the subject of conversation, over their early dinner, between the imbecile rector and his vinegar-faced, bob-curled wife; the latter remarking how unfortunately unbecoming black was to poor Miss Craven—really impossible to tell where her bonnet ended and her hair began; and how lucky it was for her that people did not wear mourning

for as long a time as they used—three months being *ample* nowadays, *ample* for a brother! Esther has sat in their pew for the first time alone: she has looked at Jack's prayer-book, at his vacant corner under the dusty cobwebbed window, with eyes dryly stoic; she has walked firmly after service down the church-path, past a grassless hillock, where he who was her brother lies, dumbly submitting to the one terrific, changeless law of decay—the law that not one of us can face, as applying to ourselves, without our brains reeling at the horror of it. Oh! thrifty, harsh Nature! that, without a pang of relenting, unmixes again those cunningest compounds that we call our bodies—making the freed elements that formed them pass into new forms of life—makes us, who erewhile walked upright, godlike, fronting the sun, communing with the high stars—makes *us*, I say, creep many-legged in the beetle, crawl blind in the worm!

It is evening now, and Esther sits, in her red armchair, beside the drawing-room fire, *alone* again. The wind comes *banging* every minute against the shuttered French window, as one that boisterously asks to be let in; the ivy leaves are dashed against the pane, as one that sighingly begs for admittance. Every now and then, the young girl looks round timidly over her shoulder, in the chill expectation of seeing a death-pale spirit-face gazing at her from some corner of the room; every now and then she starts nervously, as a hot cinder drops from the grate, or as the small feet of some restless mouse make a hurry-skurrying noise behind the wainscot. As often as she can frame the smallest excuse, she rings the bell, in order to gather a little courage from the live human face, the live human voice, of the servant that answers it.

Around Plas Berwyn also the wind thunders—against Plas Berwyn windows also the ivy-leaves fling themselves plain-

tively; but there the resemblance ends. The steady light from the lamp outblazes the uncertain, fitful fire-gleams: at Plas Bewyn there are no ghost-faces of the lately dead to haunt the inmates of that cheerful room. They are all sitting round the table on straight-backed chairs—no lolling in armchairs, no stealing of furtive naps on the Sabbath—sitting rather primly, rather puritanically, reading severely good books. To Bob's palate, the *Hedley Vicarsian* type of literature is as distasteful as to any other young man of sound head and good digestion, but he succumbs to it meekly, to please his mother; if Sunday came *twice* a week, I think he would be constrained to rebel. From the kitchen, the servants' voices sound faintly audible above the howling wind, singing psalms. The family are divided between prose and poetry. Miss Brandon is reading a sermon; her sister a hymn. Here it is:—

THE FIRM BANK.*

"I have a never-failing bank,
A more than golden store;
No earthly bank is half so rich,
How can I then be poor?

"'Tis when my stock is spent and gone,
And I without a groat,
I'm glad to hasten to my bank,
And beg a little note.

"Sometimes my banker, smiling, says,
'Why don't you oftener come?
And when you draw a little note,
Why not a larger sum?

"'Why live so niggardly and poor?—
Your bank contains a plenty?
Why come and take a one-pound note
When you might have a twenty?

"'Yea, twenty thousand, ten times told,
Is but a trifling sum
To what your Father hath laid up,
Secure in God his Son.'

"Since, then, my banker is so rich,
I have no cause to borrow:
I'll live upon my cash to-day,
And draw again to-morrow.

* A real Revivalist hymn.

"I've been a thousand times before,
And never was rejected;
Sometimes my banker gives me more
Than asked for, or expected.

"Sometimes I've felt a little proud,
I've managed things so clever;
But, ah! before the day was done
I've felt as poor as ever!

"Sometimes, with blushes in my face
Just at the door I stand;
I know if Moses kept me back,
I surely must be damned.

"I know my bank will never break—
No! it can never fail!
The Firm—Three Persons in one God!
Jehovah—Lord of All!"

A charming mixture of the jocose and the familiar, isn't it?

"Mother," says Bob, rather abruptly, looking up from a civil-spoken, pleasant little work, entitled "Thou Fool!" which he is perusing (it is generally an understood thing that conversation is not to be included among the Sabbath evening diversions at Plas Berwyn)—"Mother, do

you know I don't think I shall try for extension, after all?"

The gold-rimmed spectacles make a hasty descent from their elevation upon Mrs. Brandon's high thin nose.

"Dear Bob! why not?"

"Because I don't see why I should," he answers, frankly. "I'm perfectly well: why should I shirk work any more than any other fellow? I might say that I prefer a cool climate to a hot vapour-bath, English winds to oily calms, but I don't suppose that I am singular in that!"

"My dear boy!" says the old woman, tremulously, stretching out her withered hand across the table to him,—"why did you ever go into that dreadful profession? Why did not you enter the ministry, like your dear father, as I so much wished you to do?"

"I'm very glad I didn't, mother!" replies the young man, bluntly; "I should have been a fish sadly out of water, and, after all, I hope that Heaven will not be

quite so full of black coats that there will not be room for one or two of our colour."

"Have you told Essie?" inquires his eldest sister, joining in the conversation.

"Yes, she knows."

"Will she be ready to go with you on such short notice?"

"No."

"You'll leave her behind, then?"

"Yes."

"I thought you always had such a horror of long engagements?"

"So I have, but—but" (involuntarily lowering his voice, and lifting "Thou Fool!" to be a partial shade for his face) —"there is no engagement between us now!"

Six startled eyes fix themselves upon his face. "What!" cry three simultaneously shrill female voices. "No engagement! Has she thrown you over?"

"No."

"Have *you* thrown *her* over?" (with an astonished emphasis on the pronouns).

"No."

"Have you quarelled, then?"

"No, we haven't," answers Bob, wincing. "Poor little child! one would hardly choose such a time as this to quarrel with her. Cannot you understand two people coming to the conclusion that they are better apart; better as friends than as—as anything else?"

His three comforters stare at one another in bewilderment; then his parent speaks, shaking her head oracularly:

"I'm afraid I see how it is, Bob; you have found out that this unfortunate girl is, in some way, unworthy of you, and you are too generous to confess it, even to us."

Bob dashes down "Thou Fool!" in a fury, and his blue eyes shine with quick fire.

"Mother, do you call that the 'charity that thinketh no evil?' I tell you, Essie is willing to marry me to-morrow, but I—"

"But you are *not* willing!" interrupts the domestic pack, bursting again into full cry.

"Tell us something a *little* more probable, Bob, and we'll try and believe it," subjoins Bessy, with a small curling smile.

"It is a matter of perfect indifference to me whether you believe me or not," replies the young man, sternly; keeping under, with great difficulty, an unmanly longing to box Miss Bessy's ears. "I only tell you, *upon my honour*, that Essie is willing to marry me, and that I—solely for her own sake, solely because I know that an inferior being cannot make a superior one happy—am *not* willing."

"And a very good thing too," cries Bessy, viciously. "I always thought you were singularly ill-suited to one another; I always said so to mamma and Jane. Didn't I, mamma?—didn't I, Jane? 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?' you know."

"Girls," says poor Bob, harried almost beyond endurance, and addressing his sisters by the conveniently broad appellative which covers everything virgin be-

tween the ages of six and a hundred—"Girls, would you mind going into the dining-room for a few minutes? I want to speak to mother alone."

The "girls" look rebellious, but their rebellion does not break into open mutiny. Rising, they comply with his request.

"Of course, what *most nearly* concerns our *only* brother cannot be supposed to have any interest for *us*," says Bessy, leaving her sting behind, like a wasp, and shutting the door with as near an approach to a bang as her conscience will admit.

As soon as they are well out of the room, Bob comes and sits at his mother's feet, and lays his head on her lap, as he used to do when he was a very little boy. She passes her fingers fondly through his curly hair.

"This is a severe trial, my dear boy," she says, a little tritely; "but take an old woman's word for it; look for comfort in the right direction, and you'll *surely*, *surely* find it!"

"*I* don't want comfort," answers Bob, pluckily; he having by no means exiled his sisters in order to pule and whimper over his own woes. "*I* do very well."

"I thought you had come to your old mother for consolation," answers his parent, a little aggrievedly: naturally somewhat disappointed at being balked of the office of Paraclete, so dear to every woman's heart; "if not, what was it that you wanted to talk to me about that you did not wish your sisters to hear?"

"About *her!*" he answers, emphatically, lifting up his head, and reading her face earnestly. "I didn't wish her to be the mark for any more of Bessy's sneers. I wonder," he says, a little bitterly, "that she who is always talking about '*our Great Exemplar*' does not recollect that *He* never sneered at any one."

"Did you say that it was Esther Craven that you wished to speak to me about?" inquires Mrs. Brandon, rather coldly.

"Mother," he says, passionately, "she

has not a farthing in the world! What *is* to become of her?"

"Any one that my dear son takes an interest in will always be welcome to a home with me, for as long as they like to avail themselves of it," says the old lady, primly.

He shakes his head.

"She would not come," he says, despondently; "she is too proud: she hates to be beholden to any one: she is bent on working for her own living."

"And a very proper resolution, too," replies his mother, stoutly, her heart being steeled against Esther by a latent conviction that that fair false maid has dealt unhandsomely by her son. "Providence is always more willing to help those that help themselves."

"How *can* she help herself?" cries Esther's champion, indignantly. "What sort of work are those little weak hands, that little inexperienced head, fitted for?"

"Women with hands as weak and heads as inexperienced have toiled for their daily

bread before now, I suppose," rejoins Mrs. Brandon, with a certain hardness, foreign to her nature, and arising from that spirit of contradiction, innate in us all, which makes us look coldly upon any object that some one else is making a fuss over.

Bob springs to his feet in great wrath, and speaks low and quick: "Mother! I'm sorry I ever broached this subject to you; one takes a long time, I see, to get acquainted with one's nearest relatives' characters. If you can see the child of one of your oldest friends working her poor little fingers to the bone for the bare necessaries of life without stretching out a finger to help her, *I* cannot!"

Speaking thus disrespectfully, he walks towards the door.

> "A spaniel, a woman, and a walnut tree,
> The more you beat 'em, the better they be,"

says the rude old saw. Every woman, from a mother to a mistress, enjoys, rather than otherwise, being bullied.

The old woman half rises, and stretching out her hand to her son, says, "My boy! come back! let us talk rationally: don't quarrel with your old mother about a person that will never be as good a friend to you as she is."

He turns, half hesitating: anger's red ensign still aflame on his honest face.

"Shall I tell you, Bob, why I cannot feel common compassion for—for this girl?"

"Why?"

"Because," says the old lady, with emotion, Mr. Brandon's image heaving up and down rather quicklier than usual upon her ample breast,—"because some instinct tells me that she has not had common compassion upon you."

"'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth;' in fact," answers Bob, with a sarcasm unusual to him, "you are forgetting, mother, how often you have impressed upon me that we are no longer under the Mosaic dispensation! But why should she have compassion on me, may

I ask? In what way do I stand in need for it? *I*'m not a woman, thank God!"

She looks at him, intently, with a steadiness that disconcerts him. "Bob, can you look me in the face and tell me that you have not been unhappier since you knew Esther Craven than ever you were before in all your life?"

"I have," he answers, simply, "and happier too; so that makes it square."

Foiled in this direction, she varies her point of attack a little: "Can you look me in the face, and tell me that since your engagement she has behaved to you as a modest, honourable woman should behave to the man she has promised to marry?"

He casts his eyes down troubled, and begins to fidget with a dilapidated little Chelsea Cupid on the mantelshelf, too truthful to say "Yes," too generous to say "No."

"She is ready to fulfil her promise," he answers, evasively. "She is willing to

marry me whenever I like, as I told you before—to-morrow! to-night! this instant, if I wish!"

"For a home, of course; one can understand that, in her situation," says his mother, in a tone of slighting pity.

Bob perceives, and is stung by it.

"No, not for a home!" he answers, indignantly. "Poor soul! she may have that without paying such a heavy toll for it."

"To what motive, then, do you ascribe her willingness?"

"She told me that she liked me better than any one else in the world," he answers, with the reluctance of one who is making a statement that he believes will not be credited by the auditor to whom it is addressed.

"My poor simple boy! and you believed her?" (with a sort of compassionate scorn).

He hesitates. "I believe that she meant what she said at the moment," he replies, doubtfully.

"If there was such perfect harmony of

opinion between you, why was the engagement broken, may I ask?" she inquires, a little sharply.

No answer, except quickened breathing, and a frown slightly contracting his climate-bronzed forehead.

"Was it—oh, my dear boy! if it was so, no one can respect your scruples more than I do—was it because you were not quite sure that she was one of the Lord's people?"

"Oh, dear no!" answers the young man, quickly, with scarcely repressed impatience in his tone—"nothing of the kind. God forbid my being so presumptuously uncharitable! How am I to know who is, or who is not? All I know is that if she is not, neither am I; and I trust, mother, that you will find, by-and-by, that they are not quite such a scanty nation as you seem to imagine."

"A higher authority than I am has expressly designated them 'a little flock,'" says the old woman, sententiously, pursing

up her mouth; "but far be it from me to wish to judge, whatever you may imply. But I am still waiting to hear what your motive was for breaking your engagement, a motive which you seem to have such an unaccountable difficulty in telling me."

He looks down, for an instant or two, biting his lips; then speaks petulantly:

"Why should I tell you, mother?—why should I tell any one? A man's *motives* are his own concern, whatever his actions may be; if mine are strong enough to satisfy myself and her, surely that is enough."

"Oh, of course," answers his mother, rather nettled at what she considers a want of confidence; "only that, unless I am put in possession of the circumstances of the case, I really don't see how I can be expected to give advice——"

"I don't want advice," interrupts the young man, eagerly. "I want a much better thing—assistance."

"Assistance in what?"

"Why, in hindering that poor girl," he says, with warmth, "from being thrown upon the world penniless, helpless, and without a friend, as she will be after the sale at Glan-yr-Afon."

"Not without a friend, as long as you are alive, Bob; one can answer for that!" rejoins his mother, rather tartly.

"I count for nothing," says Bob, quietly. "A man's friendship can be of no service to a woman, unless he is in some authorized position of relationship or connection with her; otherwise he does her more harm than good. What she needs, and what I hoped she would have found in you, mother, is a woman-friend."

"If," replies his mother, drawing herself up and looking very stiff—"If she is, as you say, *too proud* to avail herself of the home that I am, *for your sake*, willing to offer her, she is likely to be *too proud* to consent to be befriended in any other way."

Brandon looks at her for a moment

with something akin to indignant scorn in his face, dutiful son as he usually is; then, repenting, throws himself on his knees beside her, and, clasping his arms about her withered neck, says, entreatingly: "Mother, why are you so hard upon her?—what has she done to you? Just think, how would you have liked Jane or Bessy, when they were her age, to have been driven out into the world to make their own way, without a single soul to say a kind word to them, or give them a helping hand; and," he continues, musingly, "they never could have been exposed to the temptations she will be—they never were beautiful, like her!"

He had never spoken truer words in all his life, but the truth is not always the best to be spoken.

"At all events," says the old lady, with emphasis, freeing herself from his arms, and getting rather red in the face—"At all events, Bob, however disparagingly you may speak of them, they were

and are good, modest, pious girls, that would not trifle with an honest man's affection for their own amusement, as handsomer ones have done before now."

"I never heard of any honest man having given them the chance," retorts Bob, sarcastically, quitting his caressing posture, with a revulsion of feeling as sudden as it was complete.

"The servants are assembled," says the youngest, best, modestest, piousest of the girls, opening the door, and putting in her little drab face. "Must I tell them to go back to the kitchen for a quarter of an hour, or has Bob nearly finished his *private communication?*"

"Quite!" replies Bob, emphatically.

He is standing leaning against the chimneypiece, his colour heightened, and a sorely angered look on his open simple face.

"You need not wait for me, mother," he continues, seeing his parent look inquiringly towards him, as she moves with the

slowness of age and portliness to the door; "I shall not come to prayers to-night. When one prays, one ought to be in charity with all the world, ought not one? And I am not."

CHAPTER XI.

The rough winds and the spiteful rains have wellnigh stripped all their red-and-yellow clothing off the trees: upon the oaks alone some leaves still hang persistent, though withered and crackly. The apples and pears are all gathered and stored for the winter; even the dark-blue Orleans plums, that require the crisping frost to ripen them, are eaten and gone.

The sale at Glan-yr-Afon is over; it is enrolled among that countless array of unrecallable events, great and little, that is past. The new tenant, an ordinary Welsh farmer, with an overfull quiver of sprouting Welshmen and Welshwomen, has entered into possession. No one has taken the trouble to "redd up" the

garden for the winter; flowers do not help to pay the rent—they give back nothing but their beauty and perfume; and so, over Esther's trim flower-beds, sheep-dogs gallop, and children, boisterous with health and spirits, run races. The rustic seat under the old cherry-tree—the seat that Jack fashioned in the summer evenings—has been broken up for firewood; and in Jack's chair in the dining-room, the father of the family reposes his plethoric bulk of an evening, when he does not happen to be getting drunk at the "Punch Bowl," and snores euphoniously.

And Bob, pursued by blessings, prayers, lamentations, and strong wishes for his safe back-coming, is gone—gone away in a smoky steamer, over the mist-mantled grey sea. Not a few of the tears that fell for him came from Esther's eyes — not love-tears, shed privily, secretly, dashed away with hasty care at the sound of any approaching footsteps, but poured out openly, publicly, in the presence of his

mother and sisters—mingled with theirs, indeed, as of no different quality. Not more openly, not more publicly, had she wept for old Luath, when, on the day before the sale, the old dog, who had ailed and moped ever since his master's (to him) unaccountable disappearance, crawled weakly to her feet, and, looking up dimly wistful into her face for the last time, died licking her tender hand. On the day before his departure, Brandon came to say "Good-bye" to her.

"I have told mother *nothing*," he says, with some embarrassment, in allusion to their late engagement—"nothing, except that I was sure that I could not make you happy. I have given her no reason, Esther—give her none either! She will not ask you point-blank, and it is always easy to evade indirect questions; there are some things that it is of no use being confidential about."

"I see," she answers, with a faint smile. "I understand, neatly as you have gilded

the pill, you are afraid that she would turn me out-of-doors if she knew what a treacherous, black-hearted wretch I have been; that I should have to take refuge even sooner than I must otherwise do in the workhouse, to which I always look forward as my final destination."

Then, bidding God bless her, he wrings her hand, strongly, and so takes his last farewell of her, nor ever sees her fair face and great gentle stag eyes again.

And now he is gone—gone with a difficult smile on his face, and very little money in his pocket. He never has much, but he has less than usual now; having spent his few last sovereigns on the erecting a plain white cross at the head of Jack's low grave, that, when this generation has passed, his place of sleeping may not be quite undistinguished from that of his neighbour dust. He has gone, with his heart's strongest longing balked, his prime hope death-smitten; but yet not despairing—not cursing his day, nor ar-

raigning High God, saying, "Why do I, undeserving, thus suffer?" He carries away with him no heavy seething load of revenge, no man-slaying ardour of hatred against the woman that has wronged him, and the man for whose sake she did it. Life is full, interesting, complex—not all on one string, whatever morbid women and moody rhymers may say; not all sexual love—all of it, that is, that is not devoted to drinking, as Anacreon, Catullus, and Moore have dulcetly told us. And therefore, though poor, disappointed, and heart-wrung, Brandon is not all unhappy. He has been greatly sinned against, and has forgiven, thus exercising the function that raises us nearest to a level with the Godhead.

And meanwhile Esther, left behind in wintry Wales, takes his emptied place at *triste* Plas Berwyn. Despite all her resolves, despite her high talk that a morsel of Mrs. Brandon's bread would choke her—that it would be better to starve than

to be under any obligation to the family of the man she has betrayed—she is now eating that suffocating bread, now lying under those annihilating obligations.

Want makes us swallow our dignity—makes us do many mean things. One *must* live; one must keep in that breath that perhaps is only spent in sighs: and Mr. James Greenwood has made us all out of love with the workhouse. So she sits down three times a day at Mrs. Brandon's table, the unwillingest guest that ever sat at any board, and eats the bread of charity, and the roast mutton and apple-tart of charity, when the conclusion of the long Puritan grace gives her permission so to do.

There is plenty of time for thinking at Plas Berwyn, for in that still household talk is not rife. When people never leave their own little one earth-nook, rarely see any one beyond their immediate family circle, and rarelier still read any reviews, papers, books, that treat of any subject but one, they have not much to talk about.

There are few minds original enough, copious enough, to suffice to themselves—to be able to do without supplies derived from external objects. Our thoughts are generally our own, merely by right of immediate possession; mostly they are the thoughts of others, more or less digested, more or less amalgamated with thought-matter of our own.

They are not unkind to her, these chill faded women. Not loving her—for, as Bessy appositely quoted. "Can two walk together except they be agreed?"—and Esther and they are most surely in nothing agreed; mistrusting her, though not knowing, of having dealt falsely by their brother; sincerely, though bigotedly, looking upon her society as unprofitable—nay, almost contaminating; as being one of the unregenerate many—one standing in the cold, outside their little clique of elect, safe souls: despite all this, they are yet willing to give her food and shelter, to give them her for an indefinite number of

years, to make her a part of their own dry sapless lives.

But she is not willing—oh, most unwilling! Let me not be mistaken, however: it is not with the dryness and saplessness of the offered life that she quarrels. Life must henceforth be to her, everywhere, dry and sapless; the duller it is, the less it contrasts with her own thoughts. It must be lived somewhere: it can be lived pleasurably nowhere. Then, why not unpleasurably, greyly, negatively, at Plas Berwyn? Why not, supposing that she had been able to pay for her own cups of tea and slices of mutton, for her own iron bedstead and deal washhand-stand?

But, supposing that she was not able; supposing that she was so destitute as to be glad, even while weeping over his poor rough body, that her old dog had died because she was too poor to be able to keep him; supposing that this life entailed upon her the bitter pain of being daily, hourly grateful to people for whose society

she had a strong repugnance, and upon whom, in the person of one of their nearest and dearest, she had inflicted a mortal injury? It is hard to live with people whose every idea runs counter to your own—whose whole tone of thought and conversation is diametrically opposed to what you have been used to all your life—and yet not be able to contradict, to argue with, or differ from them, because you are eating of their bread and drinking of their cup. The mere fact of feeling that you are too deeply indebted to people to be able, without flagrant ingratitude, to quarrel, makes you desire ardently to fall out with them.

"How much better to be a professed beggar at once!" thinks Esther, with a sort of grim humour. "How much better to whine and shuffle along the streets at people's elbows, swearing that you have a husband dying of consumption, and six children all under three years of age starving at home!"

It is only the very basest and the very noblest natures that can accept great favours and not be crushed by them. Esther's is neither. To her it is only the thought that her state of dependence is temporary that makes it supportable. She has lost no time in appealing to Mrs. Brandon for her aid in the search for work —*work*, that vague word, that conveys to her no distinct idea, that stands to her in the place of something to be done by her, in return for which she may be able to obtain food and drink, without saying "Thank you" to any one for them.

On the afternoon of the day of Bob's departure Esther has been sitting for an hour or more, in listless sadness, on the fender-stool before the fire, her eyes staring vacantly at the battered Michaelmas daisies and discoloured chrysanthemums in the wintry, darkening garden outside. Mrs. Brandon's steel knitting-pins click gently, as she knits round and round, round and round, in the mono-

tonous eternity of a long-ribbed knicker-bocker stocking. The fire-gleams flicker dully red on the sombre, large-patterned flock-paper, which makes the room look twice as small and twice as dark as it need otherwise do. Esther is roused from her reverie by the entrance of the servant with the moderator lamp.

"Mrs. Brandon!" she says, addressing her hostess.

"Yes, my dear!" The "my dear" is a concession to Bob's memory.

"Bob told me," says the young girl, with some diffidence, "that you were good enough to say that you would help me in looking for—for—something to do!"

The old lady looks scrutinisingly at her over the tops of her spectacles. "My dear son expressed such great, such *surprising* anxiety, considering that your connection with him is at an end, about your future, that I *did* promise."

"And you will?" asks the other, timidly.

"*I* always keep *my* promises, Esther, I

hope" (with a slight expressive accent on the *I* and *my*).

"When will you begin?—soon?—at once? to-morrow?" cries the girl, eagerly.

Mrs. Brandon hesitates: "I must first know for what sort of employment you wish—for what sort you are best suited?"

"I am suited for nothing," she answers, despondently; "but that must not deter me. If nobody did any work but what they were fitted for, three-quarters of the world would be idle."

"Would you be inclined to take a situation as governess, if one could be found for you in a respectable pious family?"

She shakes her head. "I don't know enough, and I have no accomplishments. I can read a few pages of 'Racine' or 'Télémaque' without applying *very* often to the dictionary; modern French, with its colloquialisms and slang, baffles me; and I can play a few 'Etudes' and 'Morceaux de Salon' in a slipshod, boarding-school fashion; but these extensive re-

quirements would hardly be enough."

Mrs. Brandon pauses in consideration. "There are so few occupations open to *ladies*," she remarks, with an emphasis on the word. "Most professions are closed upon us by our sex, and all *trades* by our birth and breeding."

"When one is a pauper, one must endeavour to forget that one ever was a lady," answers Esther, rather grimly; "my gentility would not stand in the way of my being a shoeblack, if women ever were shoeblacks, and if they paid one tolerably for it."

"Would you like to try *dressmaking?*" inquires her companion, rather doubtfully.

Esther gives an involuntary gasp. It is not a pleasant sensation when the consciousness that one is about to descend from the station that one has been born and has grown up in is first brought stingingly home to one. Happiness, they say, is to be found equally in all ranks, but no one ever yet started the idea that it was

sweet to go down. Quick as lightning there flashed before her mind the recollection of a slighting remark made by Miss Blessington, *à propos* of two very second-rate young ladies, who had come to call at Felton one day during her visit there, that "they looked like little milliners!" Was she going to be a "*little milliner?*"

"I'm afraid I don't sew well enough," she answers, gently, wondering meanwhile that the idea has never before struck her what a singularly inefficient, incapable member of society she is. "I cannot cut out: I can make a bonnet, and I can mend stockings in a boggling, amateur kind of way, and that is all!"

Recollecting whose stockings it was that she has been used to mend in the boggling way she speaks of, a knife passes through her quivering heart.

"The same objection would apply to your attempting a lady's-maid's place, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course" (bending down her

long white neck in a despondent attitude); "but" (with regathered animation in eye and tone)—"but that objection would not apply to any other branch of domestic service—a housemaid, for instance; it cannot require much native genius, or a very long apprenticeship, to know how to empty baths, and make beds, and clean grates: I ought to be able to learn how in a week."

Mrs. Brandon's eyes travel involuntarily to the small, idle, white hands that lie on Esther's lap—the blue-veined, patrician hands that she is so calmly destining to spend their existence in trundling mops and scouring floors.

"My dear child," she says, with compelled compassion in her voice, "you talk very lightly of these things; but you can have no conception, till you make the experiment, of what the trial would be of being thrown on terms of equality among a class of persons so immensely your inferiors in education and refinement."

"I believe it is a well-authenticated fact," answers Esther, firmly, "that in some town in one of the midland counties a baronet's wife is, or was, earning her living by going out charing. What right have I to be more squeamish than she?"

"It is unchristian," pursues Mrs. Brandon—unconvinced by Esther's anecdote, which indeed she treats as apocryphal—"to call any one common or unclean, and God forbid that I should ever do so! But imagine a lady, born and bred like yourself, exposed to the coarse witticisms of the footman and the intimate friendship of the cook!"

Esther's little face seems to catch some of the deep fire-glow—her breast heaves up and down in angry, quick pants.

"Mrs. Brandon, do you suppose that they would be so *impertinent*——?" she begins, fiercely; then breaks off, ashamed. "I forgot; it would be no impertinence then! Well!" (with a long low sigh) "I am tough: I have borne worse things!

This is but a little thing, after all; I can bear this!"

"I think, Esther, that if, as I fear, you are leaning on your own strength, and not on an *Unseen Arm*, you are overrating your powers of endurance."

"Perhaps; I can but try."

"Impossible!" answers Mrs. Brandon, with cool common sense. "Who would hire you? Ridiculous!—childish! No, Esther; we must try and find something more eligible for you, if you are still foolishly bent on declining the *happy*, and respectable, and (I humbly hope I may say) *pious* home that I am so willing—that we are all so willing—to offer you."

"Oh yes! yes! yes!" cries the child, passionately. "I *am* bent on it! It is less degrading even to be exposed, as you say, to the witticisms of the footman and the friendship of the cook, than to live upon people on whom you have no claim beyond that of having been already most

ungrateful to them—than to impose on their generosity, to sponge upon them!"

"As you will, Esther," answers Mrs. Brandon, loving her too little, and respecting her independence of spirit too much, to reason further with her.

There is a pause—a pause broken presently by Esther, who speaks diffidently: "Mrs. Brandon, don't you think that if I could get into one of those large shops in London, or one of our great towns, I could try on cloaks, and measure yards of ribbon, without requiring any great amount of knowledge of any kind, theoretical or practical?"

Mrs. Brandon looks doubtful. "It is not so easy as you may imagine, my dear, to obtain admission into one of those shops: a friend of mine made great efforts to get a situation for a *protégée* of hers at Marshall & Snelgrove's, or Lewis & Allenby's, and after waiting a long time, was obliged to give it up as hopeless."

"Perhaps she was not tall?" suggests Esther, rather timidly.

"I really never inquired."

"They like them tall?" says the girl, involuntarily drawing up her slight *élancé* figure; "and I'm tall, am I not?"

"I should imagine that that qualification alone would hardly suffice," answers the old lady, drily; "and indeed," she continues pursing up her mouth rather primly, "even if it would, I should hardly think a situation in a shop, or other place of public resort, desirable for a girl so young, and of so—so—so *peculiar* an appearance as you."

"Peculiar!" repeats Esther, rather resentfully, raising her great eyes in unfeigned, displeased surprise to her companion's face. "Am I so very *odd-looking*, Mrs. Brandon? I don't think I can be, for no one ever told me so before!"

"I did not say *odd-looking*, my dear," returns Mrs. Brandon, sharply; "please don't put words into my mouth."

"If people came to buy cloaks, they would surely be thinking of how *they* were looking, not how *I* looked," says Esther, not yet quite recovered from her annoyed astonishment; "*my* appearance, beyond the mere fact of my being tall, could not be of much consequence one way or another."

Mrs. Brandon takes off and lays down her spectacles, the better to point the rebuke she is about to administer.

"Esther," she says, severely, "since you insist on my explaining myself more clearly, I must tell you that I think a girl should be steadier in conduct, and more decidedly imbued with religious principles than I have any reason for supposing you to be, before she is exposed to the temptations to which a young and handsome woman is liable in one of those sinks of iniquity, our great towns."

Esther flings up her little head with an angry gesture. "I really don't see what temptations a person even as unsteady

and irreligious as I am," she says, contemptuously, "could be exposed to in a haberdasher's shop. Temptation, in a woman's mouth, always implies something about *men;* and in a place specially devoted to women's dress, one would be less likely to see them than in any other spot on the face of the earth."

"If you are so much better informed on the subject than a person of *treble* your years and experience," says Mrs. Brandon, resuming her spectacles, and beginning to knit faster than ever, "I have, of course, no more to say."

An apposite retort rises prompt and saucy to Esther's lips, clamouring for egress through those sweet red gates; but the recollection of Mrs. Brandon's weak tea and legs of mutton, and the obligations thereto hanging, drives it back again. She leans her elbow on her knee, and elevates her straight dark brows.

"The question is," she says, gravely, "can you suggest anything better? When

one has no money, and none of the acquirements that command money, one must take what one can get, and be thankful."

But Mrs. Brandon is silent, counting her stitches, buried in calculations as to whether her stocking-leg has attained the length and breadth suited to the dimensions of one of her son's large limbs.

The wind shakes the shutter as if, in its lonely coldness outside, it coveted the fire and lamplight. The old grey cat sits on the fender-stool beside Esther, yawning prodigiously every now and then; her round fore-paws gathered trimly under her, and the sleepy benignity of her face half-contradicting the fierce stiffness of her whiskers, and the tigerish upward curve of her lips.

"What is done in haste is always ill-done, my dear!" says Mrs. Brandon, presently, having satisfactorily calculated that five more rows will conduct her to Bob's large heel—giving utterance to her

little trite saw with a certain air of complacency. Original remarks come forth doubtfully, questioningly, feeling their way: it is only a well aired platitude that can strut and swagger forwards in the certainty of a good reception. "We will think over the subject seriously and prayerfully: we will take it with us to the Throne of Grace, and make it the subject of *special* intercession at worship this evening."

"Oh no, no! please not!—*please* not!" cries Esther, the lilies in her fair cheek turning quickly to deepest, angriest carnations. "I should not like it: I could not come to prayers if you did. Why cannot we talk it over *now*, this instant? There's no time like the present."

"I see no hurry, Esther," answers Mrs. Brandon, coldly.

"But there is a hurry!—*every* hurry!" exclaims the girl, passionately, throwing herself on the floor beside Mrs. Brandon, too much in earnest to be chilled by the

frosty cold of her manner; her whole soul thrown, in bright entreaty, into the great clear pupils of her superb, up-looking eyes. "I don't think I ever knew what the words meant till now. I don't believe I ever could have been in a real hurry in my life before! Put yourself in my position, Mrs. Brandon," she says, laying her little eager hand on her companion's rusty-black-coburg knee; "imagine how you would like to be wholly dependent, not only for luxuries and comforts—one might well do without them—but for bare bread and water, on people that are neither kith nor kin to you, and that have taken you in out of Christian charity, and because they think it right—not in the least because they love you!"

"If I were exposed to such a trial, Esther," replied Mrs. Brandon, deliberately rubbing her spectacles gently with her pocket-handkerchief, "I hope that I should bear it meekly; that I should kiss the rod, knowing that it was an

Allwise Hand that brandished it, and that I was so chastened in order to lower the pride of a too carnal heart."

"Then God forbid that my carnal heart may ever be so lowered!" cries the other, springing impetuously to her feet, and drawing up her head haughtily. "Why," she continues, beginning to walk up and down the little room with agitated steps and fingers hotly interlaced—"why did God implant such an instinct as self-respect in us, if supinely submitting to what destroys all self-respect is a passport to heaven? Who would bow beneath any rod if they could get from under it? It is a metaphor that always reminds me of a naughty child, or a broken-spirited cur."

Mrs. Brandon deposits her knitting on the table; rises slowly—old people's joints, like wooden dolls, decline to bend on short notice (it is a pity, is it not, that our machinery is not calculated to remain in a state of efficiency, even through our paltry seventy years?)—

dismounts from the footstool, on which her feet have been perched, walks to the door, there stands, and, shaking her stiff grey curls, speaks with trembling severity:

"Esther, until you can discuss this subject with less irreverent violence, I must beg to decline any further conversation upon it."

CHAPTER XII.

"WANTED, by a young person, aged 17, a situation as companion to an invalid or elderly lady. Salary not so much an object as a comfortable home in a pious family. Address, A. B., Post Office, Naullan, N.W."

This is the modest form in which Miss Craven's desire for work comes before the public. She had begged earnestly for the expunging of the "pious family."

"It is not true, Mrs. Brandon," she says, with vexed tears in her eyes; "it is nothing to me whether they are pious or not—the salary is far the greatest object."

"If it is, my dear, it ought not to be," answers promptly Mrs. Brandon, who, having paid for the insertion of the adver-

tisement, thinks that she has a right to word it as she wishes.

And now it has gone forth through the length and breadth of the civilized world, from the Arctic to the Antarctic Poles—has found its way into clubs and cafés, hotels and private houses, numerous as the sea-sand grains, in the overgrown advertisement sheet of the *Times*. To not one in ten thousand of that journal's millions of readers is it more interesting than any other announcement in the long columns of—

"Wanted, a cook."

"Wanted, a cook."

"Wanted, a good plain cook."

"Wanted, a footman."

"Wanted, a footman."

A companionship, then, is what has been decided upon as the vocation to which Esther is best suited: it requires neither French nor German, neither astronomy nor the use of the globes: it demands only a patience out-Jobing Job, a

meekness out-Mosesing Moses, a capacity for eating dirt greater than that of any *parvenu* struggling into society, health and spirits more aggressively strong than a schoolboy's, and a pliability greater than an osier's. These qualities being supposed to be more quickly acquirable than music, drawing, and languages, Esther has decided upon entering on the office that will call for the exercise of them all.

Besides the printed advertisement above quoted, Mrs. Brandon has been advertising largely in private, by means of many long-winded epistles; has been seeking far and wide among the circle of her acquaintance for some grey maid, wife, or widow, in the tending of whose haggard, peevish age Esther may waste her sweet ripe youth, unassailed by wicked men, in safe, respectable misery. And meanwhile Esther waits — waits through the fog-shrouded, sun-forgotten November days, through the eternal black November nights

—waits, straying lonely along the steaming tree-caverned wood-paths — the solemn charnels of the dead summer nations of leaves and flowers.

Preachers are fond of drawing a parallel between us and those forest-leaves; telling us that, as in the autumn they fall, rot, are dissolved, and mingle together, stamped down and shapeless, in brown confusion, and yet in the spring come forth again fresh as ever; so shall we—who, in our autumn, die, rot, and are not —come forth again in our distant spring, in lordly beauty and gladness. So speaking, whether thinkingly or unthinkingly, they equivocate—they lie! It is not the *same* leaves that reappear; others *like* them burst from their sappy buds, and burgeon in the "green-haired woods;" but *not* they—*not* they! They stir not, nor is there any movement among the sodden earth-mass that was *them*. If the parallel be complete, others like us,—others as good, as fair, as we! but yet *not*

we—other than us, shall break forth in lusty youth, in their strong May-time; *but we* shall rot on!

> "Oh touching, patient earth,
> That weepest in thy glee;
> Whom God created very good,
> And very mournful we!"

how much longer can you bear the weight of all your dead children, that lie so heavy on your mother breast!

One morning, on joining the Brandon family before prayers, Esther finds Mrs. Brandon reading aloud a letter; but on Esther's entrance she desists. Hearing her voice stop, the young girl comes forward eagerly.

"Is it about me?" she asks, panting, forgetting her morning salutations.

"Yes, Esther," replies Mrs. Brandon, laconically, continuing to read, but this time to herself.

Esther walks to the window, drums on the rain-beaten pane, returns to the table; takes up the bread-knife, and begins to

chip bits of crust off the loaf; sits down, gets up again; then, unable to contain herself any longer, cries out, hastily, "Will it do?—will it do?"

"If you will give me time, my dear, to finish this letter in peace, I shall have a better chance of being able to tell you," answers the old lady, drily.

Esther sits down again, snubbed; and then the door opens, and the three middle-aged, quakerish maidservants make their sober entry, each with bible and hymnal in her hand; and the long exposition, the eight-versed hymn, and extempore prayer set in. To Esther's ears, all the words of exposition, hymn, and prayer seem to be, "Will it do?—will it do?"

"I have received a letter," begins Mrs. Brandon, slowly addressing Esther, when the "exercise" is ended, "from a valued Christian friend of mine, who has lately met with a lady and gentleman considerably advanced in life, who are on the look-out for a——"

"Companion?" interrupted Esther, breathlessly.

"For a young person who may supply the place of their failing sight, by reading to them, writing letters for them—may arrange the old lady's work, and make herself a generally useful, agreeable, and ladylike companion."

"That does not sound hard, does it?" says Esther, with a nearer approach to hopefulness in her face than has been seen there since her brother's death. "Neither reading, writing, nor being ladylike are very difficult accomplishments, are they? Oh, Mrs. Brandon, I hope they'll take me, don't you? What is their name?"

"Blessington!"

"Blessington!" repeats Essie, her lips parting in some dismay. "I wonder are they—can they be—any relation to Miss Blessington, Sir Thomas Gerard's ward?"

"I really cannot tell you, my dear. You have given us so very little information as to your visit to the Gerards, that I

was not even aware that Blessington was the name of Sir Thomas's ward."

Esther passes by the small reproach in silence.

"Perhaps they may be her father and mother," suggests Bessy.

"She has no father nor mother."

"Her grandfather and grandmother?"

"She has no grandfather nor grandmother."

"Her great-uncle and great-aunt?"

"Possibly."

"Very likely the same family," remarks Mrs. Brandon, intending to say something rather agreeable than otherwise; "Blessington is not a common name."

"I recollect," Esther says, contracting her forehead in the effort to recall all that was said upon a subject which at the time interested her too little to have made much impression—"I recollect her mentioning one day having some old relations in ———shire, whom it was a great bore to have to go and visit."

"These people live in ———shire."

"Then it must be the same," cries Essie, a look of acute chagrin passing over her features. "Oh, Mrs. Brandon, what a disappointment! I'm afraid we shall have to look out again! I'm afraid this won't do!"

"And why not, pray?" inquires the other, staring in displeased astonishment from under her thick white eyebrows at her young *protégée*.

Silence.

"Did you," inquires the old lady, looking rather suspiciously at her, "have any quarrel or disagreement with the Gerards during your visit which could render you unwilling to meet any one in any way connected with their family?"

"Oh no! no!—certainly not!" answers Essie, vehemently, blushing scarlet as any June poppy.

The elder woman's sharp ancient eyes pass like a gimlet through and through the younger one. They fasten with the

pitiless fixedness of one who has passed the age for blushing, and has consequently no compassion for that infirmity upon the betraying red of her sweet bright cheeks.

"Are you *quite* sure, Esther?"

"Quite," replies Esther, with steady slowness. "I don't like them, as a family. In fact, I *hate* them all; but I have had no quarrel with them."

"I wonder that you cared to spend a whole month and more with people that you hated," says Miss Bessy, with a sprightly smile.

"So do I, Bessy," answers Esther, bitterly, turning away her head; "but that's neither here nor there."

"Am I to understand, then," says Mrs. Brandon, with an inquisitorial elevation of nose and spectacles, "that an apparently *groundless* and, as far as I can judge, *ungrateful* feeling of dislike towards people who, from the little you have told us of them, seem always to have treated you with indulgent kindness, is your sole

motive for wishing to decline this very desirable situation?"

"When one has seen better days," answers the poor proud child, sighing, "one wishes to keep as far as possible from any of those who have known one formerly."

"Tut!" answers Mrs. Brandon, chidingly; "it can be a matter of very little consequence to people in the position of the Gerards whether you have a few pounds a year more or less. They can afford to be kind to you, whatever your circumstances may be!"

"I don't *want* them to be kind to me," cries the girl, fiercely, stung into swift anger. "I know nothing I should dislike more. The only wish I have, with regard to the whole family, is that I should never hear their names mentioned again!"

Mrs. Brandon seats herself at the table, and begins to pour out the tea out of a huge, deep-bodied family tea-pot. Miss Bessy divides the small curling rashers of

fat bacon into four exactly equal portions. At Plas Berwyn it is generally a case of "Cynegan's Feast; or enough and no waste." That is to say, at the first onslaught *everything* vanishes; and if any one, with fruitless gluttony, craves a second help, he must console himself with the idea that many medical men agree in the opinion that, in order to preserve ourselves in perfect health, we should always rise from table feeling hungry.

"If," says Mrs. Brandon, resuming the conversation, and setting her words to the music of a peculiarly crisp piece of toast, which she eats with a rather infuriating sound of crunching—"If, Esther, you can be deterred by so trivial an obstacle from availing yourself of an opportunity, humanly speaking, so promising—a door, I may say, opened for you in a *special* and *remarkable* manner, in answer to prayer—you cannot expect me to exert myself a second time on your behalf."

Esther stoops her head in silence over

her fat bacon, which she has not the heart to eat.

"Esther is more difficult to please than we expected, is not she, mamma," says Bessy, smiling slightly—"considering that she told us yesterday she envied the man who brought the coals, because he earned his own living?"

"And so I did," answers Esther, gloomily.

"I'm afraid, Esther," says Mrs. Brandon, taking another piece of toast, and shaking her head prophetically, "that you will have to pass through a *burning fiery furnace* before the stubborn pride of the unregenerate heart is brought low!"

"Perhaps so," answers the young girl, calmly; but to her own heart she says that she defies any earthly furnace to burn hotlier than the one she has already passed through.

CHAPTER XIII.

In another week letters have passed, references been asked and given; Esther proved unimpeachably respectable; the amount of her salary agreed upon; the day of her journey into ——shire fixed, and all preliminaries settled previous to her undertaking the agreeable, free, and independent office of companion to John Blessington, Esq., of Blessington Court, in the county of —, aged eighty-nine, and to Harriet Blessington, his wife, aged eighty.

Miss Craven has but one good-bye to say, and on the afternoon of the day before her departure she stands in the churchyard, ready to say it. It is only to a grave. Huge cloud headlands, great

leaden capes and promontories, mournful and heavy with unwept snow-tears, heap and pile themselves up behind the dim mirk hills: it snowed last night, but the snow has nearly all melted; only enough remains to make the old dirty church-tower, from which great patches of white-wash have fallen, look dirtier than ever. Upon the broken headstones, all awry and askew with age and negligence, the lichens flourish dankly. Wet nettles and faded bents overlie, overcross each cold hillock. No one cares to weed in the garden of the dead. Each hillock is the last chapter in some forgotten history.

Oh! why must all stories that are told truly end amongst the worms? Why must death be always at the *end* of life? Oh! if we could but get it over, like some cruelest operation, in the middle or early part of our little day; so that we might have some half a life, some quarter or twentieth part even of one, to live merrily in, to breathe and laugh and be

gay in, without, in our cheerfulest moments, experiencing the chilly fear of feeling the black-cloaked, skeleton-headed phantom lay his bony finger on us, saying, "Thou art mine!"

Upon the grey flat tombstone near the church-gate the great grave yew has been dropping her scarlet berries, one by one—berries that shine, like little lights, amid the night of her changeless foliage; there they lie like a forgotten rosary, that some holy man, having prayed amongst the unpraying dead, going, has left behind him. Evening is closing in fast; the air is raw and chill; no one that can avoid it is outside a house's sheltering wall; there is no one to disturb Esther's meeting with her brother. What cares she for the cold, or for the six feet of miry earth that part them? She flings herself upon the sodden mound; stretching herself all along upon it, as the prophet stretched himself on the young dead child—hand to hand, heart to heart, mouth to mouth. She lays her lips

upon the soaked soil, and whispers moaningly, "Good-bye, Jack—good-bye! Oh! why wont they let you answer me? Why have they buried you so deep that you cannot hear me?"

Lord God! of what stuff can Mary and Martha have been made, to have overlived the awful ecstasy of seeing their dead come forth in warm supple life out of the four-days-holding grave! Their hearts must have been made of tougher fibre than ours, or, in the agony of that terrible rapture, soul and body must have sundered suddenly, and they fallen down into the arms of that tomb whence their brother had just issued in his ghastly cerements, in dazed, astonied gladness!

As Esther lifts her streaming eyes, they fall upon the inscription on the cross at the grave-head:

"HERE LIETH THE BODY
OF
JOHN CRAVEN,
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
SEPT. 24TH, 186—. AGED 21 YEARS."
"*Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner!*"

She casts her arms about the base of the holy symbol; she presses her panting breast against the stone. "Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner!" she cries too; and surely the live sinner needs mercy as much as the dead one? And as she so lies prostrate, with her forehead leant against the white damp marble, a hideous doubt flashes into her heart—sits there, like a little bitter serpent, gnawing it: "What if there be *no* Lord! What if I am praying and weeping to and calling upon nothing!

" . . . . Let me not go mad!
Sweet Heaven, forgive weak thoughts! If there should be
No God, no heaven, no earth in the void world—
The wide, gray, lampless, deep, unpeopled world."

They tell us—don't they?—in our childhood, that wickedness makes people unhappy: I think the converse is full as often true—that unhappiness makes people wicked.

A little icy wind creeps coldly amongst

the strong nettles and weak sapless bents, blowing them all one way—creeps, too, through Esther's mourning weeds, and makes a numbness about her shivering breast. For a moment an angry defiant despair masters her.

"What if this great distant Being, who, without any foregone sin of ours, has laid upon us the punishment of *life*—in the hollow of whose hand we lie!—what if He be laughing at us all this while! What if the sight of our writhings, of our unlovely tears and grotesque agonies, be to Him, in His high prosperity, a pleasant diversion!"

So thinking, against her will she involuntarily clasps closer the cross in her straining arms—involuntarily moans a second time, "Lord have mercy upon me, a sinner!" No—no! it cannot be so! it is one of those things that are too horrible to be believed! There is no justice *here!* none! but it exists *somewhere!* How else could we ever have conceived the

idea of it? It is, then, in some other world: we shall find it on the other side of these drenched, nettly charnels—on the other side of corruption's disgrace and abasement:

> " . . . . . If this be all,
> And other life await us not, for one
> I say, 'tis a poor cheat, a stupid bungle,
> A wretched failure! I, for one, protest
> Against it—and I hurl it back with scorn!"

Despair never stays long with any one, unless it is specially invited. Struck with sudden horror at the daring blasphemy of her thoughts, wretched Esther, with clasped hands and a flood of penitential tears, sinks upon her trembling knees. God grant that the thoughts that come to us, we know not whence, that stab us in the dark, that we welcome not, neither cherish at all—yea, rather, drive them away rudely, hatingly—may not be counted to us for crimes in His great Day of Reckoning, any more than the sudden-smiting disease that makes the strong man flag in

his noonday is counted to him! With a sudden revulsion of feeling, with a paroxysm of devotion, powerfuller than the former one of doubt had been, the desolate child, prone on the grave of her one treasure, lifts quivering lips and emptied arms to Him who—

> " . . . . . For mankynde's sake
> Justed in Jerusalem, a joye to us all!"—

to Him of whom

> " . . . They who loved Him said 'He wept,'
> None ever said He smiled!' "

Perhaps the good Lord, who was sorry for Mary and Martha, may be sorry for her too. Perhaps, after all, her boy is well rid of troublesome breath—well rid of his cares, and his farm, and his useless-loving sister! Perhaps she is falsely fond to desire him again—to be so famished for one sight more of his grey laughing eyes, of his smooth stripling face! Beyond her sight, he may be in the fruition of extremest good—in the sweet shade,

beneath pleasant-fruited trees, beside great cool rivers. Would she tear him back again thence to toil in the broiling sun, because, so toiling, he would be in her sight?

> "If love were kind, why should we doubt
> That holy death were kinder?"

The night falls fast; she can scarcely any longer distinguish the clear, new black letters on the cross. Lights are twinkling from the village alehouse; the forge shines like a great dull-red jewel in the surrounding grey; laughing voices of boisterous men are wafted unseemly amongst the graves. Shuddering at the sound, she raises herself up quickly; then, stooping again, kisses yet once more the wet red earth that is now closest neighbour to her brother, and sobbing "Good-bye, my boy, good-bye!—God bless you, Jack!" gathers her dusky cloak about her slight shivering figure, and passes away through the darkness.

CHAPTER XIV.

It has snowed all day; an immense white monotony is over all the land. The clouds that piled themselves in sulky threatening last night behind the Welsh hills, and many others like them, have to-day fulfilled their threats, and have been, through all the daylight hours, emptying their flaky load on the patient earth. It is as if a huge white bird had been shaking his pinions somewhere, high up in the air—shaking down millions of little down feathers. Rain always seems in earnest, snow in play—with such delicate leisureliness does it saunter down. The rushing train, that bears Esther to her new distant life, is topped like any twelfth-night cake; so are the wayside stations; so are the

houses in the smoky towns; so are the men, sparsely walking about on the country roads; so are the engine-drivers and stokers: so are the sheep in the fields.

Miss Craven has been sitting all day long in the narrow *enceinte* of a railway carriage, between the two close-shut, snow-blinded windows—sitting opposite a courteous warrior, who, travelling with all the luxuriousness which his sex think indispensable, is magnanimous enough to share his buffalo-robe and foot-warmer with her. A *tête-à-tête* of so many consecutive hours with a man would, under any other circumstances than a railway journey, have produced an intimacy that would last a life-time; but now, all the result of it is a couple of bows on the platform at Paddington—a look of interested curiosity after his late companion's retreating figure, as she hurries herself and her small properties into a filthy four-wheeler, on the part of the warrior, and total oblivion on the part of Esther.

Since that time she has traversed London in her dilapidated shambling *growler*, she has had awful misgivings that the "cabby," with the villany that all women ascribe to all "cabbies," is purposely taking her in a wrong direction—is bearing her away to some dark policeless slum, there to be robbed and murdered. She has reflected, with cold shivers of terror, as to what would be the wisest course to pursue, supposing such to be the case. Should she look silently out of window till she caught sight of the friendly helmet and tight frock-coat of some delivering "Bobby," and then scream? Should she open the door and jump out on the snowy pavement?

While still undecided, her cab stops, and—all mean back-streets and sorry short-cuts being safely passed—deposits her, and her box, bag, and umbrella, beneath the Shoreditch lamps and among the Shoreditch porters. Then an hour's waiting in the crowded general waiting-

room, where all the chairs are occupied by fat men, none of whom make a movement towards vacating theirs in favour of the slender weary woman, who, with crape veil thrown back from her sad child-face, is holding her little numb hands over the fire, trying vainly to bring them back to life. Then more train; then a three-miles' drive in a fly, up hill and down dale, along snowy country lanes.

And now her journey is ended: the fly has stopped at the door of a great, vague, snow-whitened bulk, that she takes upon trust as Blessington Court. The driver, having rung the bell, now stands banging his arms, each one against the opposite shoulder, in the rough endeavour to restore circulation. The servants are too comfortable—the butler over his mulled port in the housekeeper's room, and the footmen over their mulled beer in the servant's hall—to be in any hurry to attend to the summons. At length, after five minutes' waiting, a sound of withdrawing

bolts and turning keys makes itself heard; the heavy door swings inward, and a footman appears in the aperture, blinking disgustedly at the snow, which drives full into his eyes. Esther immediately descends, and enters with the abrupt haste characteristic of extreme nervousness.

"Will you pay him, please?" she says, with a certain flurry of manner, to the servant. "I—I don't know how much I ought to give him—how many miles it is."

While the man complies with her request, she stands in the huge stone-floored hall, lit only by firelight, shivering with cold and fear. She peers up at the ceiling—of which, by-the-by, there is none, as the hall runs up to the top of the house; at the walls, from which great life-size figures, dimly naked, glimmer uncomfortably cold. Anxious doubts assail her, as to whether there are any rules of which she is ignorant for a "companion's" behaviour and deportment; she is not aware that she has ever seen one of those curious

animals hitherto in the course of her life. Ought they to make a reverence on entering a room? Ought they to say "Sir" or "Ma'am" to whoever they address? Ought they to laugh at everybody's jokes?—not sit down unless given leave so to do, and not speak unless spoken to? So wondering, she tremblingly follows the footman as he opens the door of an adjoining apartment, and, announcing "Miss Craven," retires joyfully to the society of his compeers and his beer.

The apartment in which Esther is thus left stranded is as large as the hall that she has just quitted. It seems to her oppressively immense—quite a long walk from the door to the inhabited portion. A very big roasting fire burns on the hearth; and right in front of it, in the very glare of its hot red eyes, sits a very old man, doubled together in an armchair—one hand in his breast, and his aged head sunk upon it, apparently fast asleep. An old lady, wrapped up in a shawl,

reposes in another easy-chair, with her eyes likewise closed. A lamp with a green shade burns faintly on a centre table, and beyond lamp and table sits a third person, hidden by the lamp-shade from Esther's eyes.

"Are they all asleep?" thinks the poor girl, advancing with gentle, hesitating steps. "They seem to be. How can I wake them?—or would it be disrespectful?"

While she so speculates, the third person rises and comes forward. "How do you do, Miss Craven? You must have had a cold journey, I'm afraid?" says a bland, unforgotten voice.

It is Miss Blessington. In an instant, Esther seems to have jumped back over the past intervening months—to be just entering on her Felton visit. There is the same voice greeting her—the same tones of polite inquiry; the same words almost, except that *then* it was, "How do you do, Miss Craven? You must have had a hot

journey, I'm afraid?" and now it is, "How do you do, Miss Craven? You must have had a cold journey, I'm afraid?" —the same undulating walk; the same effect of lilac evening clouds. Involuntarily she turns her head and glances towards the window, half-expecting to see St. John's legs disappearing through it. Instead, an old woman's voice sounds quavering: "Are you Miss Craven, my dear? Come here!"

Esther does not hear. "It *was* rather cold," she says, answering Constance, in half-bewilderment between past and present, her eyes dazed with the light after her long dark journey.

"Mrs. Blessington is speaking to you," says Constance, in mild reminder.

Esther turns round quickly. "Oh! I beg your pardon—I did not hear—I hope I was not rude," she cries, forgetting the "Ma'am" she had half-purposed employing.

"Who's there?—who's talking?" asks

the old man, lifting up his head, and speaking in a voice tremulous indeed, but with a remnant of the power and fire that "youth gone out had left in ashes."

No one answers.

"Who's there, Mrs. Blessington?" he repeats, with querulous anger.

"Miss Craven, uncle—the young lady that we expected to-day—don't you know?" replies Constance, stooping gracefully over him, and putting her lips as close as possible to his withered ear.

"H'm! Tell her to come and speak to me. I want to see what she is like," he rejoins, much as if she had not been in the room.

"Go to him, my dear," says the old lady.

"And speak as loud as you can; he is as deaf as a post," adds Constance, not in the least lowering her voice at this announcement, in perfect confidence of the truth of her assertion, shrugging her handsome shoulders as she speaks.

Esther goes [illegible]bling; and lays her small cold hand in the long bony wreck of muscle, vein, and flesh that is stretched out to her. He gazes at her face with the eager intentness of the purblind.

"What is your name?" he asks abruptly.

"Esther," she answers, faltering.

"Cannot hear a word you say—you mumble so," he says, pettishly.

"Go round to the other side; the other ear is the best," suggests Constance, calmly.

Esther obeys. "*Esther*," she repeats, speaking unnecessarily loud this time—at the top of her voice, in fact, out of sheer nervousness.

"You need not scream at me, my dear, as if I were stone-deaf. *Esther*, or *Hester*, did you say?"

"Esther."

"And who gave it you, pray?"

"My father and mother, I suppose."

"H'm! Well, you may tell them, with my compliments," he says, with a senile

laugh, "that I think they might have found a prettier name to give a young lady, and that the old squire says so. The old squire says so," he repeats, chuckling a little to himself.

"I cannot tell them," answers Esther, half-crying. "They are dead!"

"Oh, indeed!"

There his interest in the newcomer seems to cease. His white head sinks back on his breast again, and he relapses into slumber.

Esther has had neither luncheon, dinner, nor tea—a fact which none of her companions appear to contemplate as possible. *One* bun has been her sole support throughout the long bitter day—*only* one, because all such buns must be bought with Mrs. Brandon's money.

"I daresay you would like to go to bed, dear—you look tired," says Mrs. Blessington, scanning rather curiously Esther's fagged, woebegone little face. "Travelling is so much more fatiguing than it used to

be in former days when one travelled in one's own carriage, whatever they may say. I remember," she continues, with an old woman's garrulity, "Mr. Blessington and I travelling from London to York, by easy stages of twenty miles a day, in our own curricle, with outriders. One never sees a curricle nowadays."

"I *am* rather tired," the girl answers, with a faint smile; and "cravingly hungry" she might have added, but does not.

"Ring the bell for James to light the candles."

Weak from inanition, and with limbs cramped by long remaining in one position, Esther follows Miss Blessington up low flights of uncarpeted stone stairs, through draughty twisting passages, along a broad bare gallery, down more passages, and then into a huge, gloomy, mouldy room —frosty, yet cold, despite the fire burning briskly on the old-fashioned-hobbed grate; a vast dark four-poster, hung with ginger-coloured moreen; a couch that

looks highly suitable for lying-in-state on: an old-fashioned screen, covered with caricatures of Fox, Burke, the Regent, and Queen Caroline; and on the walls a highly valuable and curious tapestry, which waves pleasantly in the bitter wind that enters freely beneath the ill-fitting old door, giving an air of galvanic motion and false life to the ill-looking Cupids, green with age, that play hide-and-seek amongst vases, broken pillars, and wormy blue trees.

"You have plenty of room, you see," says Miss Blessington, with a curve of her suave lips, as she lights the candles on the dressing-table, which, instead of being pink petticoated, white-muslined deal, is bare sturdy oak, with millions of little useless drawers and pigeon-holes in it.

"Plenty," echoes Esther, rather aghast, surveying her premises with some dismay.

"You must not be frightened if you hear odd noises; it is only rats," says her companion, putting one small white-booted foot on the fender.

"I wish that [redacted] stuff would not sway and shake about so," says the young girl, pointing nervously with one timid forefinger to the tapestry. "Might not some one get behind it very easily and hide, as it does not seem to be fastened down?"

"Possibly," replies Miss Blessington, indifferently. "I never heard of such a thing having happened."

"Am I near any one else?—tolerably near, I mean?" asks Esther, her heart sinking.

"Not very."

"Would no one hear me if I screamed?" she inquires, laying her hand unconsciously on the marble round of her companion's firm white arm, while her frightened eyes burn upon Constance's impassive face.

"We will hope that you will not make the experiment," she answers, with a cold smile, and so goes.

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